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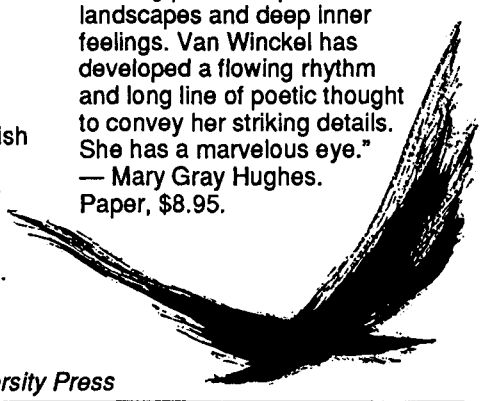

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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

A new book of poems by an Advisory Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, the book will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

EMILY GROSHOLZ: *Shores and Headlands.* Princeton University Press. $16.00 (cloth); $9.95 (paper).

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Unsolicited mss will be read according to the following schedule: *Nonfiction*: January 1 through March 31, and October 1 through December 31; *Poetry*: April 1 through September 30; *Fiction*: June 1 through November 30. Unsolicited mss received at other times will be returned unread. Manuscripts submitted by subscribers who so identify themselves will be read throughout the year. Manuscripts will not be returned nor will inquiries be answered unless accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. No responsibility is assumed for their loss or injury.

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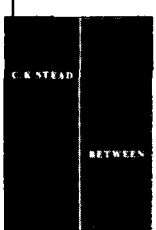

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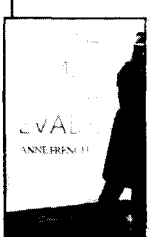

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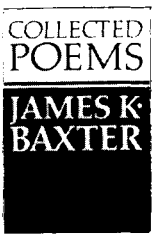

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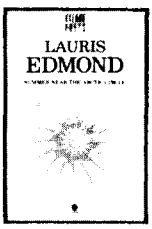

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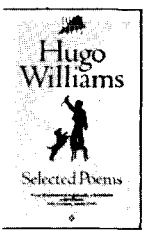

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Letters to the Editors

Dear Editors:

Because the issues are more important than my book, I would like to reply to a number of points that Dick Allen makes in his review of *Home Economics* in your Summer 1988 issue.

First, Mr. Allen raises the old bugaboo of drudgery. *All* of his farm classmates, he says, suffered from drudgery on the farm. Now, he says, they "work in the new shopping malls, or have gone into real estate, or have moved many states away," in all of which circumstances they have, he says, escaped drudgery, which is a generalization of the sort that we had better doubt. It seems unlikely either that his friends' lives on the farm were entirely made up of drudgery, or that they have entirely escaped drudgery in shopping malls or real estate offices or in other states far away. In my book, I talked at length about drudgery, the conditions that enforce it, and the conditions that relieve it—all of which Mr. Allen ignores.

Mr. Allen next says that "Berry slights psychological realities. Mainly economic conditions, he feels, have caused the family farm to go under." My book certainly does deal with conditions other than economic. However, the main difference between Mr. Allen and me is that I do not believe that economic reality can be so neatly set apart from psychological reality. If his classmates were, as he says, "exhausted morning to night" from drudgery and overwork, that is a reality at once psychological and economic. Mr. Allen will not find in anything I have written that I have recommended or approved this condition.

Mr. Allen then says that, "Reading Berry, one notes he has miraculously whisked out of existence television, airplanes, computers, and a gigantic array of other technologically-induced elements of the modern world not about to melt into airy dreams." If Mr. Allen would look again at my book he would see airplane travel discussed (as psychological reality) on pages 21–23; he would see television mentioned on pages 38 and 138; and he would see computers discussed (also in terms of psychological reality) on page 120. Virtually my entire book, indeed, is concerned with the "gigantic array of . . . technologically-induced elements of the modern world."

Mr. Allen apparently cannot think except by reducing everything to a cliché. Thus he cannot deal with what I say except by describing me as a stereotypical "old-fashioned" "romantic," intent upon whisking the modern world out of existnece. But he also says that I am a Luddite. How one can be a Luddite and yet ignore the conditions that call forth Luddism, he does not explain. As he deals with

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me, so he deals with my subjects. The farmer who is the subject of my essay, "A Good Farmer of the Old School," Mr. Allen describes as "a farmer who makes the small farm provide a decent living by dint of hard work and use of such things as natural fertilizer." This farmer does indeed use manure on his fields, and I have no doubt that he works hard. The point of my essay, however, had to do with this farmer's substitution of knowledge for purchased supplies, a point which is made plainly and in detail, and which Mr. Allen ignores.

If, as Mr. Allen says, agreeing with me, "We instinctively know that we are living wrong," then I cannot see why he finds my proposal that we should live better to be "extreme." My argument is no more extreme than it is "popular" (which he also says it is). I have only sought to learn the ways of caring for natural and cultural gifts, and have only recommended that we should do so. Most of my argument is derived from the Bible and the writings of the American founders.

Mr. Allen says, "We need values; we have learned to distrust them." This statement is nonsense unless we trouble to say exactly what values we are talking about and what exactly is to be trusted or distrusted about them.

People who are committed to values, at any rate, understand that compromise is a last resort, not a goal. "I cannot hold back the world," Mr. Allen says. "It is a *compromise* I must seek within it . . . we must have a willingness and assumed duty to monitor and shepherd, in what small ways we can, technology, industrialization, telecommunications, space exploration, medical and genetic research." Compromise, I would point out, is not a *position* from which such negotiations can be satisfactorily conducted. It is, in fact, not a position at all. One would like to know in what "small ways" Mr. Allen proposes to monitor, shepherd, and compromise with the assumptions and attitudes that have resulted in Love Canal, Bhopal, Chernobyl, and the general destruction of land, water, and air. Such evils can be opposed only from an understanding of correct principles of behavior—principles that have been available to us from several cultures for several thousand years.

Finally, I would point out that Mr. Allen's concluding paragraph is only another of numerous recent examples of what Allen Tate, in 1945, recognized as "the new provincialism"—the provincialism of "provincials who do not live anywhere." "Our local place," Mr. Allen says, "is the planet itself and *everywhere* on it must be conceived of, cared for, and understood as home." My answer is that caring for this planet requires one, not to talk, but to *do* something, and something cannot be done *everywhere* by mere people who are always only *somewhere*. It has been my observation that not much help is to be expected from people who want to care for our "local"

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planet but who disdain or neglect to care for any local place. It is only in local places—in Kentucky or upstate New York or wherever—that we have the planet under foot.

Port Royal, Kentucky WENDELL BERRY

Dick Allen replies:

In appraising my essay review of his *Home Economics*, Mr. Berry quotes me out of context. What I wrote was "But our century has had too many plans, too many holocausts, cultural revolutions, killing fields, too much selfish patriotism for us to trust extensively in the teaching and promulgation of values. No matter how initially or seemingly well intended, we have too often witnessed values turn dogmatic and perverted. *We need values; we have learned to distrust them.* It is a terrible paradox."

Mr. Berry's values, expressed in *Home Economics*, mainly are "derived from the Bible and the writings of the American founders." The evils of technology's excesses, he says, "can be opposed only from an understanding of correct principles of behavior—principles that have been available to us from several cultures for several thousand years." Frankly, as I've pointed out above, I distrust those who admit to knowing "correct principles of behavior," and who may apply such principles to everyone, regardless of culture or religion. My own values are probably not much different from Mr. Berry's, but I consider them relative. My belief in representative democracy, for instance, would not be shared by a Marxist who might be just as insightful as Mr. Berry in suggesting ways out of our modern nightmare.

As for "compromise," I quote from Mr. Berry's essay in *Home Economics*, "Preserving Wildness": "If I had to choose, I would join the nature extremists against the technological extremists, but this choice seems poor, even assuming that it is possible. I would prefer to stay in the middle, not to avoid taking sides, but because I think the middle *is* a side, as well as the real location of the problem." My point, exactly—though I never wrote that I would "compromise" with the assumptions and attitudes that resulted in Love Canal and the like.

With Berry, I believe in strong community involvement and defense of the "local place": I have remained in mine for twenty years. Where we differ is in our measurement of each individual's or society's capacity. The problems of acid rain, nuclear prolifera-

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tion, depletion of the ozone layer, overpopulation, destruction of the rain forests . . . and one could go on and on . . . require we do *more* than concentrate on our local place. Mr. Berry's essays, I fear, encourage the kind of isolationism no longer possible in the global village.

We are world as well as local citizens. Since our professions may *require* us to move our homes frequently, are we then to think of ourselves as less valuable in our ability to contribute to healing the planet? I've often seen newcomers to my town do more in a year for such things as wetlands preservation and establishment of "decent, affordable housing" than those whose families have been here for generations.

In my review, I mentioned some "small ways" of monitoring and shepherding. Mr. Berry, as I, has chosen to devote a significant portion of his writing to ecological concerns. Others are active in national politics, in responsible corporate decision making, in teaching, in religious outreach programs, in international organizations such as Greenpeace. There are hundreds of international causes and one must do what one can for them *in addition* to caring for the local place, or there eventually may *be* no local place. At the very least, "monitoring and shepherding" means, for Americans, insistent and continual practical political involvement to aid in electing national representatives who understand our global ecological crisis and are willing to act wisely in aiding the planet.

Mr. Berry's other points are minor, personal rather than global. Those readers referring back to my review will, I hope, note how he has misextended my discussion of drudgery and misinterpreted my comments on economic and psychological reality. They will also find an extensive, mainly laudatory treatment of how Mr. Berry deals with other matters in his book, matters he does not refer to in his letter. As for his consideration of "technologically induced elements of the modern world," a few lines or a couple of paragraphs concerned with television, airplanes, and computers is not the same as incorporating into one's total understanding (see Marshall McLuhan's writings) the complex culture-shattering and reforming effects they have had on the contemporary world. Computer technology and satellite weather monitors have already given us new ways of comprehending and dealing with global dangers. Acid rain may not have reached Kentucky, but it has ruined many of the lakes in upstate New York. The disaster at Chernobyl affected most of Europe. We cannot survive, as a race, by limiting our efforts and care to the physical space we happen to inhabit this month, this year, this lifetime.

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Dear Editors:

Only someone who has just trudged through the enormous, Keats-ridden critical oeuvre of Helen Vendler—as I did immediately prior to writing my recent piece on her ("Helen Vendler, Poetry Critic," *The Hudson Review*, Winter 1989)—can begin to imagine the subconscious synaptic screw-up that transformed one of the most famous poems in the language into "Keats's 'Immortality' ode," and that kept me from noticing this error during several careful examinations of the page proofs. My apologies to all Wordsworths, living and dead.

New York, New York BRUCE BAWER

Coming in the Summer 1989 issue of The Hudson Review: "It Should Never Happen to You," a story by Robert McDowell; "Landscape and Fiction: Jean Renoir's Country Excursion," an essay by Gilberto Perez; and "Storytellers and Mystics," a poetry chronicle by Dick Allen. Poetry by Charles Tomlinson, Robert Phillips, Mark Jarman.

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Comment:
Lost in America

WHILE PAINTING DANIEL BOONE'S PORTRAIT, the American artist Chester Harding asked the frontiersman if he had ever been lost. "No, I can't say I was ever lost," Boone replied, "but I was bewildered once for three days." I was bewildered once for seventeen years, the whole of my childhood near the interminable climate-controlled stretch of shopping malls and parking lots called Paramus, because for some reason I always had the sense that New Jersey and New York and for all I knew the whole of the Northeast had been mysteriously grafted onto the real America. So I ended up going to the Midwest for college and to the Southeast for graduate school, and afterwards I took a job at the University of Kentucky because I intuited that I would get a better education teaching there than at one of the bigger schools. During the autumn of our second year in Lexington my wife, an artist who teaches art history part-time at the University, was reading the real estate ads in a local greensheet in her office before class one evening when her eye caught this: "FOR SALE: Remote cabin on 15 acres, Red River Gorge. Cliffs, caves, waterfalls. 1000 sq. ft., 2 BR, electricity. Great for relaxing, hiking, writing. Under $12,000." When she showed it to me I couldn't believe what I was seeing. We phoned the owner immediately and drove out the next weekend to have a look.

Remote was seventy miles to the east of Lexington, in Menifee County, first on a highway and then on a series of winding and increasingly hilly and woody backroads through towns with names like Camargo (pop. 450) and Bagdad (pop. 250) and Grants Lick (pop. 50); past fields of yellow-green tobacco and past the Primitive Baptist Church which was no larger than a small sagging garage and past the Lucky Stop Pentacostal Barn which doubled as a used-car lot and past block letters in white paint on the side of another gray barn that spelled SECULAR HUMANISM IS THE DEVIL'S WORK; and into and out of the last town, Frenchburg (pop. 296), which consisted of a Methodist church, a Piggily Wiggily Food Mart, a post office and Mom's Kuntry Kitchen. Remote was first running out of paved road and then running out of gravelled road and then finding your white Dodge Colt spattering through seven-inch-deep mud puddles and lurching through hiphigh wild grass and bobbing over dried red dirt to the point that you weren't really sure if you were on a road anymore or not. Remote was no running water and no indoor plumbing and no heating and no insulation and holes in the roof and the glass in the front door shattered last

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winter by a hunter searching for some warmth who left a note of thanks tacked near the fireplace. Remote was heaven in my head and trumpets in my chest and the real America pounding like crazy in my heart. We bought the place the next day.

Initially we drove up there once or twice a month. We brought tools and old furniture and we worked. We had the roof fixed, a phone put in, a new front door put on, sunk a well whose water we discovered was undrinkable because of the coliform count. We decided we couldn't afford insulation and that a hot-water heater was pretty much an extravagance that would probably crack come a cold winter anyway. We labored through the fall, spent a frigid Thanksgiving and New Year's there, and set our noses to the grindstone again the next spring. By early summer we had begun to think of our house in Lexington as a place in which to do our business and our cabin ten miles outside of Frenchburg as our place of grace.

"If I seek the sense and skill of children, the information of a thousand books, the innocence of puppies, even the insights of my own city past, I do so only, solely, and entirely that I might look well at a creek," Annie Dillard says in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. My goals are neither so high nor so noble. All I want to be able to do is look well at our outhouse. It's a gorgeous thing, redwood and tidy and with the remains of an indoor-outdoor carpet on the floor and a bucket of lime and a plastic dove-colored cup in the corner. You sit with the door open in summer for the breeze and with the door open in winter for the view of naked pines and cedars sloping down gently in front of you and then abruptly falling away off a limestone cliff into thousands of acres of uninhabited forest. It is impossible to read a book in there. It is impossible to think of any politics save democracy in there, perched as you are above the most egalitarian system in creation. My mother on her first recalcitrant visit to Kentucky could not bring herself to say the word *outhouse*. "Call it a cathedral, then," I told her, and she did, and my wife and I soon picked up the same habit.

All I want to be able to do is look well at the five-inch-long acorn-brown lizard that waits every morning on our top step, head raised with dignity and alertness, reptilian grin frozen on his face. Or at the thousands of large astonishing jelly-bubble sacks of frog eggs in the puddles sprinkled through the woods. Or at the blue-black ratsnake that forms a scrawl like a discarded bicycle innertube among the wild blueberry bushes and sassafras shrubs near the ledge at Whippoorwill Point on the eastern end of our property that rises two hundred feet above the forest floor. Or at the undulating bands of chestnuts and hourglasses which are the copperhead that coils in the leafy shadows of a rotten log, arrogant and only apparently lethargic. John Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed, could see snakes better than I do. Once he was bitten by a poisonous one

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and lived to tell about it and someone later asked him what had become of it. "The poor thing!" Johnny Appleseed said. "Hardly had it touched me than I, overcome by godless passion, cut off its head with my sickle." I shoot mine. The spring after we bought the cabin I went out and bought a .20-gauge shotgun. All my Northeastern discomfort about the evil of carrying firearms vanished in a flash the first time I saw a short stubby ochre squiggle looking up at me with its black glassbead eyes. There are few things as powerful and as concentrated as the joy of killing a symbol of darkness, except perhaps running a chainsaw at full throttle in the afternoon sun, a megalithic roar in the head, a spray of magically scented woodchips collecting around you. Opal Smallwood, my farmer-neighbor a mile up the road, knows this better than I do. During one spring a few years ago he shot no fewer than twenty-three rattlers in one of his fields alone.

Now I better understand all those shotguns you see in the back windows of those shiny black pickups with over-sized wheels speeding along the backroads at twilight. I better understand the bangs you hear at midnight down in the forest somewhere behind the screech of cicadas. People are coon hunting. As you lie in bed late at night you can hear the dogs barking. My neighbors do it for fun, but more importantly they do it to survive. No one within a five-mile radius of my cabin has a steady job. Or to put it more plainly, their steady job is subsistence. They farm two or three acres. They make squirrel soup. They make that sour smell that comes drifting into the cabin with birdsong on hot foggy summer mornings. It's the smell of the stills down in the nearby hollow. My neighbors run them for a little extra cash. I don't, however, understand all those rebel flags you see in the same back windows of those same shiny black pickups with the same over-sized wheels speeding along the same backroads. "Remember the Civil War!" the flags seem to be saying. "Remember the South!" But Kentucky was on the side of the North during the Civil War. It had wanted to stay neutral, only in 1861 Confederate troops invaded from the west and so the legislature created a military force to drive them out, and Grant helped. So did most of the Kentuckians. Seventy-five thousand of them fought for the Union. Only thirty-five thousand fought for the Confederacy. That seems to me a lovely signature of the state. It is a place that can never quite figure out what it is. It can never quite decide whether it should side with Abraham Lincoln or Jefferson Davis, both of whom were born here less than a hundred miles apart. Those rebel flags ask, "Should we be Northern or should we be Southern, Eastern or Midwestern, rich or poor, Democrats or Republicans, what?"

Such regional schizophrenia is registered in my students as well. They find book learning useless because books don't help you bag a coon or cook up lambfries, but they also sense that book learning is

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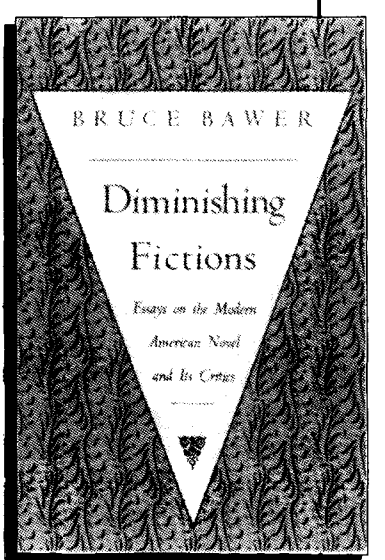

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associated with success, whatever they think that is. So my coeds diligently take notes in my American survey course but, like many students here and elsewhere, they have utterly no sense of the past. Come exam time, they inform me with sure seriousness and the best of intentions that Freud published *The Interruption of Dreams* in 1900 and that the Civil War took place between 1964 and 1968 at Columbia University. On weekends they pack up and travel for hours—the state is 350 miles from east to west, 175 miles from north to south—back to their all-white counties (during the sixties only one building burned on campus and that was because of an accidental electrical short) in which the Ten Commandments are pegged to the wall of every schoolroom, and where their parents refer to Lexington as Sodom and Gomorrah and where everything makes perfect sense to them. They have an iron-strong and near medieval sense of community, so it's not for nothing that Guy Davenport in an essay called "Hobbitry" tells how interested J. R. R. Tolkien used to be in Kentucky. And it's not for nothing that one of my students, a woman in her forties, dropped a class of mine after first telling me she would pray for me because she learned that I had been raised a Unitarian. And it's not for nothing that at the end of their formal education students leave the state for twelve months, maybe twenty-four, even forty-eight, but give them enough time and pretty soon you'll see them strolling the streets of their hometowns again, tugged back to Kentucky by some irrefutable gravity of common sense and common roots.

There is another side to such a strong feeling of place and people, and that is an almost unbelievable sense of kindness. Opal Smallwood was over one morning for coffee and noticed out the window that a large dead pine was threatening our cabin. I told him I would have cut it down but I didn't have the knack yet of aiming felled trees and I was worried it might hit the electrical lines or, worse, the roof. We went on talking about other things and I soon forgot all about the pine. The next day Opal showed up with his brother Virgil and Virgil's chainsaw and without asking they cut down that tree and two others which looked as though they might give me problems if a storm came up. Afterward, I asked if I could pay them for their work. "Ain't there such a thing as bein' neighborly?" Opal asked. Gurney Norman, an Appalachian writer-friend, tells the story of how he recently visited an eighty-year-old woman who had spent more than a month sewing an exquisite crazy-quilt for him. When Gurney asked how much he owed her for her effort she said forty dollars. He offered her two hundred, arguing that her time alone was worth more than that, not to mention the dazzling beauty of her quilt, but she wouldn't hear of it. So he paid her the forty dollars and then sought her son, who was working in a nearby filling station. Gurney asked him to change the oil and while the son worked Gurney explained what had just happened with the

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quilt. "Christ," the son said after listening a while, "the old folks ain't got no sense of the price of things these days. You go right back there and tell her I said she *got* to take your money." "I'll do that," Gurney said, feeling relieved. "By the way, how much do I owe you for the oil change?" "That'll be a dollar twenty-five," the son said.

Last spring Walter Abish came to the University to give a fiction reading and my wife and I took him out to the cabin to show him what sort of America I had found. We met Homer Ingram whom we had hired to build us a porch. Homer was measuring and sawing wood in back of the cabin when we arrived. Walter was obviously a little flustered to meet a native Kentuckian but he recovered almost instantly and, eager to make pleasant conversation, put on his lovely European charm and picked up a board that was lying close by and asked in his slightly Germanic accent, "Is this what they call a two-by-four?" Homer smiled consolingly and politely took the board from Walter and asked, "You work at the University?"

Every Friday evening is visiting night around Frenchburg. Often, and always without warning, Homer stops by with his wife and daughter around eight o'clock. My wife and I offer them coffee and invariably they turn it down. Being an academic, I can't stand space that isn't filled up with language and so I invent small talk, ask Homer what to do in case a copperhead bites you. "Dip your arm in kerosene," he says. "Kerosene?" I ask, baffled, always just a little on guard in case I'm missing some irony or another. "Yep," he says. Then he settles back and smiles, and his wife smiles, and his daughter smiles, and my wife and I smile and we go on like that for perhaps five minutes. It took me a number of these visits to realize that Homer wasn't shy and he wasn't tongue-tied and he certainly wasn't being ironic. He just didn't have anything else to say for a while and he didn't see the use of wasting words.

My mother came to visit for a week last spring and was terrified at the prospect of accidently stepping on a snake. She took our snakebite kit with her wherever she went. Walking down the gravel road late one afternoon, we ran into Ferrell Bailey. Ferrell is a retired schoolteacher and blind in one eye and has a house maybe a mile down the road from us. My mother immediately began explaining that the worst thing about Kentucky was the prevalence of snakes. "They aren't so bad," Ferrell said. "You just shoot 'em." I thought my mother would hoot and run back to her car and drive madly away and that I would never see her again. I thought she was so afraid of bullets that I hid my shotgun before she came and never even mentioned that I had one. But she didn't even flinch. "How?" she asked. "How what?" I asked. "How do you shoot them?" she asked Ferrell. Ferrell came by the next day and showed her with his .22 rifle filled with birdshot. He took her into the

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woods and for an hour I heard snap after snap after snap. When they returned again *she* was holding the gun. Ferrell said he would lend it to her for as long as she needed it. Ferrell also showed her how to pick raspberries and brought out a jug of moonshine for her once because she had wondered aloud what it might taste like. Now my mother cheerfully visits the cabin several times a year and even stays there a month by herself in the summer when my wife and I are away teaching in England. She still calls the outhouse the cathedral.

One day late last autumn after a rain my wife and I picked up our walking sticks and went out for a hike. The sky was a solid heavy gray and the leaves were all down and a keen chill was in the air. We followed a new trail down to the forest floor and then deeper and deeper into the woods. The wet birches were the color of cinders. We could see our breaths and our fingers grew stiff and pink. We walked and talked for several hours, listened to wild turkeys in the distance, then decided to head back. But, stunningly, when we turned around the trail had disappeared. It must have been growing smaller and less well marked the last mile or so. All we saw were woods and we were far enough down in the valley that we had no way of seeing any landmarks. "We're lost," my wife said. My heart clattered around inside my ribcage, then stilled, and with her words I suddenly realized I'd finally gotten to where I had been heading all the time.

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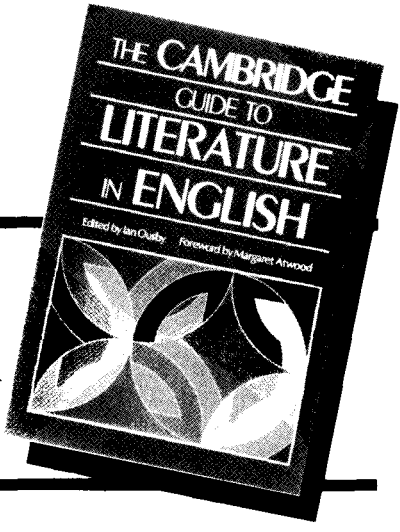

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CLARA CLAIBORNE PARK

Talking Back to the Speaker

Let's suppose I have something to say. And I fool around with it, and write it again, and try it another way, and another, because even though it's saying what I want it to it's not saying it right. And suppose it finally comes to me that the trouble (part of the trouble) is the *voice*: that I'm writing it for *The Hudson Review* when it should be for *PMLA*. Or vice versa. So I rewrite it one more time and send it in. If it's published, and if (just suppose) it's talked about, its thesis, its illustrations, its attitudes, its arguments, will not be attributed to a speaker. They will be attributed to me.

I have, of course, a number of voices. I want to juggle two of them here: one loose, a bit anecdotal, appropriate to personal history, the other appropriate to the chase through texts. The texts will show how small can be the beginnings of a major change in the conditions of literary perception, and how inconspicuously it can achieve authority. I'll use the other voice to insinuate what I think.

"It has become traditional," explains J. Paul Hunter in the poetry volume of *The Norton Introduction to Literature*,

> to distinguish between the person who wrote the poem and the person who speaks in a poem, for an author often chooses to speak through a character quite different from his or her real self.

Traditional: what everybody knows, without knowing how we know it; the universal practice which has come to seem right. Hunter, with his "often," is a pretty low-key expositor of the tradition, willingly conceding that "in many poems the speaker is very like the author, or [there's a catch] very like what the author wishes to think he or she is like," and that "between the speaker who is a fully distinct character and the author speaking honestly and directly, are many degrees of detachment." Written not for freshmen but for us, M.H. Abrams' *Glossary of Literary Terms* is considerably more categorical:

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> In recent literary discussion "persona" is often applied to the first-person narrator, the "I", of a narrative poem or novel, or the lyric speaker whose voice we listen to in a lyric poem. Examples of personae are . . . the first-person narrator of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (who in the opening passages of various books discourses at some length about himself); the Gulliver who tells us about his misadventures in *Gulliver's Travels*; . . . the speaker who talks first to himself, then to his sister, in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"; the speaker who utters Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale". . . . ; and the Duke who tells the emissary about his former wife in Browning's "My Last Duchess." By calling these speakers "personae" . . . we stress the fact that they are all part of the fiction, characters invented for a particular artistic purpose. That the "I" in each of these works is not the author as he exists in his everyday life is obvious enough in the case of Swift's Gulliver and Browning's Duke, less obvious in the case of Milton. . . . , and does not seem obvious at all to an unsophisticated reader of the lyric poems of Wordsworth and Keats.

For "recent literary discussion" Hunter's "degrees of detachment" are only a function of the reader's naiveté. That every literary "I" is fictional is "a fact." "We stress" it. It takes only a single pronoun to embody a tradition.

Now an anecdote. I've told it elsewhere so I'll keep it short:

It's twenty-five years ago. You can tell, because I'm teaching Great Books, and in a community college, and to pretty much everyone who comes in off the street. We're reading the *Inferno*; a student, not one of the smart ones, raises his hand. He hasn't spoken before, but today he has a question. "We've read what Homer says about the afterlife, and what Plato says, and now we're reading what Dante says, and they're all different. Mrs. Park. *Which of them is true?*"

The good students rustle and smirk; already they know (how?) that this isn't a question you ask in English class. A bit of irony will reinforce them and solace me; they're on my side, I need them, teaching isn't easy. Or I can drop irony for sympathetic explanation, summon I.A. Richards out of the air in which he is unquestionably hovering, and say something to the effect that "the statements which appear in the poetry are there for the sake of their effects upon feelings, not for their own sake," and that "to question whether they deserve serious attention as *statements claiming truth* is to mistake their function." I catch myself just in time. Who is closer to Plato and Dante, I

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and my little band of sophisticates, or this earnest questioner? Which of us is reading as they expected to be read?

That happened long ago. Today we have a more elaborate armamentarium against the profound demands of naiveté. Today I could explain to my student that Plato told his myths of the afterlife through a speaker who though called Socrates was only a fiction invented for a particular artistic purpose. I could involve him in distinctions between Dante the narrator and Dante the poet. I could invoke spectres, an "implied author," a ghostly "authorial presence." I could raise wall after glass wall between him and these vanished human voices he had come to think had something to say directly to him. If I really worked at it, I could bring even such a student to believe what my smart students of a generation ago already suspected; that in English class, what's relevant is what's interesting, not what, if anything, is true.

Actually, I don't get many students like that any more. I'm teaching in a different place, and time, too, alters curriculum and consumers. Great Books aren't being taught much these days: teachers have doubts about "the canon"; students' interests in literature seldom reach back past 1900. Not that they're not smart. Most of the students in my sections of Introduction to Literature don't need Hunter's explanation; some wouldn't even be surprised by Abrams'. The preppies and the kids from suburban high schools already know what you are supposed to do when you talk about a poem; the others will find out the first week that you say "the speaker" and not "Frost says," that it's not Shakespeare who's worried he's growing old, not Donne who's saying good-bye to his lover, not Keats who talks to a vase. Soon the locution of detachment will become second nature. A class on *Channel Firing* will clue in the laggards, since the others have already had *My Last Duchess*. Next step "The Turn of the Screw," or if that's too familiar, *The Good Soldier*. That'll learn 'em who to trust.

The speaker. The narrator. I want here to trace something of the history of this innocent locution, since there was within living memory a time when it wasn't traditional, when the distinction between "the person who writes" and "the person who speaks" went unmade, except, of course, when poems like Browning's enforced it. Did reading feel different then? If

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language conditions experience—and certainly to think *that* has become traditional—so pervasive a change in the way we talk about poems and stories must matter; must affect as well as reflect the way they are taught and encountered—not to say written. Does critical and pedagogic practice enact an idea of progress, of gain uncompensated by loss? What should we conclude about a time when professors and critics were more unsophisticated than today's freshmen, when everybody said "the poet says," or "Milton," or "Keats" as if it was the most natural thing in the world? For memory informs me, and my coevals confirm, that it was possible as recently as the forties to take courses from the likes of Austin Warren and F.O. Matthiessen and emerge innocent of the distinction. Back then, when Yeats wrote that his heart was driven wild, we assumed that—masks or no masks—he meant it.

It happened that between the forties and the sixties I was out of the academic world, and when I got back into it, the tradition was in place. My colleagues taught *My Last Duchess* and *Channel Firing*; they said "the speaker"; they talked about voice and tone. One likes to do the done thing; soon I was doing it too. I do it to this day, off and on, at least when I'm teaching Introduction to Literature. But because I didn't grow up with it, because I encountered the ideas not as an exciting corrective but as a fact accomplished, I still view it as an outsider. It is as an outsider that I interrogate the nagging discomfort I feel when I hear the words, or read them, or say them. It's small, but in twenty-five years it hasn't gone away. It is out of that discomfort that I chase down the history of the phrase and ponder its implications.

If I can remember a time before the speaker, I can remember too how we read poetry in the olden days. By the time I was eighteen, I had read hundreds of poems, thousands of lines, hitting the high spots, sieving out phrases that fitted my sense of life, ignoring the rest; drunk on eloquence, sometimes merely on sound, on Abanah and Pharphar, on silken Samarcand and cedared Lebanon—reading like a child, if that conveys any meaning today when it's a rare child that grows up on poetry. We were still reading like that in college; the word "impressionistic" was made for us. We didn't know you *could* analyze a poem. I remember the exams—marvelous, expansive

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essay topics, tempered by "spot questions," previously unseen passages whose period and author we must identify merely by style, by the way the words went. We got quite good at this, so we must have learned something, but nevertheless it was a revelation to take Matthiessen's course and pay *attention* to poems, to watch meaning emerge from the scrutiny of syntax and symbol and structure. Imagine it, you could write a whole paper on one poem. Unbeknownst, we were being introduced to "close reading," to the New Criticism, as yet hardly christened. But not to "the speaker."

People had written about poetry (if we begin with Plato) for more than two millennia without feeling the need for such a phrase. Where should I start my chase? Not with Johnson; champion of the common reader, his sense of the poet's relation to his utterance would be as direct as Sidney's a century and a half before. Shelley wouldn't use it, nor Wordsworth, nor Arnold. Though Chambers' Victorian *Cyclopedia* recognized the "mysterious, misanthropic personage who tells the story of Tennyson's *Maud*," or the possibility that some of Shakespeare's sonnets were "written in a feigned character," there was no word of a speaker. Maybe Eliot? For our generation of readers, everything started with him.

How the years telescope our past! Revisited, Eliot sounded a lot closer to Arnold than to Cleanth Brooks; he didn't do close reading, found it "very tiring" when other people did, had, apparently, no need for "the speaker." I.A. Richards? That seemed more likely. He had given us poetry as pseudostatement, and one good distancing mechanism deserves another. I took out *Practical Criticism*.

Cambridge students in the twenties, apparently, read no better than our freshmen do today. (But how much better they wrote! How wide their vocabularies! How complex their sentence structure! How much they seemed to know about prosody, about literary history, even though it only seemed to get in their way!) They read, in fact, much as I had twenty years later, and Richards had found out what to do about it. By the simple but original expedient of presenting them with unattributed poems, he deprived them of their hard-learned stereotypes and, sentence by sentence, insisted that they attend to what the poet was saying. In 1943, I hadn't really thought that poems

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came in sentences, like prose; I'd thought they were a different kind of thing altogether.

Since Richards had literally eliminated the poet from his students' experience of reading, I was ready momentarily to encounter the poet's surrogate, the speaker. And so I did, first in a trivial example (quoted from a rather obtuse student who had evidently reached for the phrase lacking the poet's name), then used by Richards himself.

> Furthermore, the speaker . . . chooses or arranges his words differently as his audience varies. . . . Finally, apart from what he says (Sense), his attitude to what he is talking about (Feeling), and his attitude to his listener (Tone) there is the speaker's intention, his aim, . . . the effect he is endeavouring to promote.

Had I already located the *ur*-persona? Not so fast. The book was half over. Richards had considered thirteen poems without mentioning a speaker; he was now embarking on a general discussion, not of poetry, but of "human utterances," of speech itself. Naturally speech implied a speaker. This one, like most others, had aims and intentions, endeavoured to promote effects; "We speak," Richards informed us, "to say something." His *we* was inclusive. Here was no mask, no "voice," no Duke of Ferrara, not even necessarily a writer. Richards' speaker was only ourselves talking. I kept on reading, but in 185 more pages the speaker did not reappear.

Might he show up in Richards' star pupil? William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* appeared in 1930, the year after *Practical Criticism*. It gave us a word we couldn't do without, and taught us, more than any other single book, how much could be teased out of a poem. (Eliot was later to refer to "the lemon-squeezer school of criticism.") But it did not distinguish poet and speaker. The single time Empson used the term was to make clear, in discussing Herbert's *The Sacrifice*, that "the speaker is Jesus." The phrase was available at need, but normal usage remained, to use Abrams' word, "unsophisticated." It did not occur to Empson to render anonymous that "speaker who talks first to himself, then to his sister" in *Tintern Abbey*, or to attenuate Wordsworth's relation to what, in Empson's straightforward words, "he wants to make a statement about."

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> Wordsworth seems to have believed in his own doctrines and wanted people to know what they were. It is reasonable, then, to try to extract from this passage definite opinions on the relations of God, man, and nature.
>
> Wordsworth may . . . have *felt* a *something far more deeply infused* than the *presence* that *disturbed* him.
>
> He talks as if he owned a creed.

When Empson writes of Shelley's Skylark that "the poet is rapt into an ecstasy which purifies itself into nescience," it might be Matthew Arnold.

Five years later, in R.P. Blackmur's *The Double Agent*, the speaker's voice is still inaudible, even in the chapter on "The Masks of Ezra Pound," where Blackmur explains, for readers to whom it is evidently unfamiliar, a term that neither Richards nor Empson had used:

> *Persona*, etymologically, was something through which sounds were heard, and thus a mask. . . . Mr. Pound's work has been to make *personae*, to become . . . in this special sense . . . a person through which what has most interested him . . . might be given voice.

Yet Blackmur talking about poets was no more sophisticated than Empson. For him too poets spoke to say something, and in general the poem was what they said: "An apple, Mr. Stevens says [in *Le Monocle de Mon Oncle*], is as good as any skull to read." It might be "says," or something stronger: "For Keats, the Nightingale . . . let him pour himself forth." In any case, Keats uttered the ode, not a speaker.

By 1935, then, speaker and persona had made their appearance, but separately and very inconspicuously. Clearly, they had not yet made their way into critical practice, let alone theory.

It wasn't until I rounded up an old copy of Brooks and Warren that I found what I was looking for. I should have looked there first. Here were the terms I had found in place in the mid-sixties: Richards' *tone*, and with it, the speaker as we have come to know him. For the first time? Who can say? Literary critics have not as yet earned a concordance, and the teacher, as someone once remarked, sculpts in snow.

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Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry* was first published in 1938, and its fourth edition is in print today—an astonishing record of pedagogical influence. Brooks and Warren brought the principles of neo-critical reading within the compass of teachers in every college, then in every high school. Revisiting it today, it's hard to appreciate the originality of his modestly titled "Anthology for College Students." The poems were accompanied by the explanations, questions, and exercises of a conventional textbook. Certainly the selection was new; metaphysical and modern poems were generously interspersed among the nineteenth-century favorites. But it was their arrangement that most plainly proclaimed a new agenda. They were not in chronological order, nor were they grouped by author nor by theme. A long "Letter to the Teacher" made the priorities clear: "Study of biographical and historical materials," served by chronological and authorial ordering, and "inspirational and didactic interpretation," invited by thematic grouping, were mere substitutes for the proper "object for study," "the poem in itself."

The poem in itself was now inherently dramatic (as Blackmur had said it sometimes but not always was). As a little drama, it had acquired a speaker. "What does section four [of *Ode to the West Wind*] tell us about the speaker? Does the poem sufficiently present his situation? Or do you need to consult a life of Shelley in order for the passage to gain full significance?" The answer was not far to seek.

Though Richards had not doubted that a poet, like other human utterers, had aims and intentions, he had denied him the truth-value of what he said. Poetry was different from philosophy, from all expository prose; it made pseudo-statements. (Eliot concurred, then demurred when he became a Christian.) Brooks and Warren made the application clear: there should be no "confusion between scientific and poetic communication." Poetry's pleasure and profit should be sought, not as of old in particular beauties or isolable *sententiae*, but in the poem as "an organic system of relationships," "object for study," objet d'art. In his *Principles*, Richards had named "message hunting." Brooks and Warren introduced the phrase to a generation of teachers and students—and poets—who

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learned from it not only how poetry should not be read but what it should not be.

And how does "the speaker" function to deter message-hunting? *Mrs. Park, which of them is true?* Why should the speaker speak truly? The Duke of Ferrara did not. Once the poet was dissolved in the persona, his poems scattered under new rubrics like "tone" and "imagery," a student was no longer in a position to ask questions about the attitudes and convictions of a single human being. *We* speak to say something; "the speaker" might say something different in every poem. And though the poet-as-speaker might retain his aims and intentions, the student must experience them with some loss of urgency. The danger of "inspirational or didactic interpretation" is markedly reduced when the unacknowledged legislators of mankind speak at one remove. Only a fool trusts a man in a mask.

Yet again, not so fast. If any such implications existed, they were still in embryo. Brooks and Warren might say "the speaker," but they were far from saying it consistently. And they certainly did not think of their new phrase as a possible focus of critical or pedagogic attention. Their Glossary contained no entry for "speaker" or "persona," and in their single explanatory sentence the poet came first. "Every poem implies a speaker of the poem, either the poet writing in his own person or someone into whose mouth the poem is put." The authors themselves shifted between speaker and poet almost at random.

> [Of *A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal*] Is the speaker saying that his loved one seemed so thoroughly immortal that he simply was asleep to the possibility that she could ever die?
>
> [Of *The Scholar Gypsy*] The poet says that his own age is confused by doubts.

There is, of course, a distinction to be made between the poet insofar as he speaks to say something, and the poet *qua* poet, shaping, ordering, choosing, and now and then the authors seemed to have it in mind: "Does the poet succeed in dramatizing the suggestion that the daffodils accept the speaker as a companion?" But the distinction collapses in practice. Back to

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the *Nightingale*: "This poem is obviously a reverie induced by the poet's listening to the song of the nightingale," not the poet as craftman, but "the poet . . . just sinking into the reverie," the poet who "wishes for a dissolution of himself," and "breaks out of his reverie" in the last stanza. "Poet" melts imperceptibly into "speaker" as the discussion progresses, the total number of occurrences of each holding equal at eleven. In the book as a whole the usage is almost entirely fluid: if "the speaker" of the *Nightingale* has an "attitude toward death," it's "the poet" who has an "attitude toward fate" in Marvell's *The Definition of Love*. Sometimes the likely distinction is actually reversed: for *Among School Children* it's "the speaker himself and . . . the woman he loves," yet for *Two Songs from a Play*, so much less personal and circumstantial, it's "Yeats believes." Brooks and Warren are not yet committed to the speaker. "Is Johnson actually pointing a moral?" they ask of *The Vanity of Human Wishes*; when push comes to shove, as it generally does with the Doctor, it's back to the poet. Even an inspirational or didactic interpretation may get by if you agree with it: for *Shine, Perishing Republic*, the questions are "Does this poet hate America? Is he trying to admonish his country?"

Brooks was no more consistent when writing alone and for grown-ups, and only slightly more conscious. In *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), written, presumably, while he was working on *Understanding Poetry*, we hear much more from poets than from speakers: "Marvell . . . compares himself and his mistress to parallel lines"; "Donne may argue as in 'The Nocturnal on St. Lucy's Day' that he is nothing." Speaker and poet comfortably coexist: of *Ode to the Confederate Dead*: "The world which the dead soldiers possessed is not available to the speaker of the poem. . . . Moreover, the poet is honest: the leaves, for him, are merely leaves." Eight years later, in *The Well Wrought Urn*, the smokeless air over Westminster Bridge still "reveals a city the poet did not know existed," and it is "the poet" who begins the Immortality Ode "by saying he has lost something." By the next page, however, there has been a silent metamorphosis into "what the speaker has lost," and soon the usage is hopelessly confused: "Wordsworth says that the rainbow and the rose are beautiful": "the moon is treated as if she were the speaker himself"; "the poet cannot see the gleam."

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Practice has not yet hardened into consistency, still less into precept. Elton's *Glossary of the New Criticism*, published the next year, glossed "tone" and "irony," but not "persona."

Brooks came closest to making the distinction explicit in the chapter on Gray's Elegy, where he reproved Empson for failing to realize that "we are not dealing with Gray's political ideas," but with "what the Elegy says," with "the *speaker's* choice." The emphasis is Brooks's own; we can imagine him underlining the word. The issue resurfaced only in an appendix, where Donald Stauffer was criticized for confounding "the protagonist of the poem with the poet, and the experience of the poem as an aesthetic situation with the author's personal opinion." But Brooks was only working toward such aesthetic purity; in the body of the book he had not yet attained it. Old simplicities die hard.

It was not until 1951, in Reuben Brower's *The Fields of Light*, that we were told straight out that a poem is not merely a drama, but "a dramatic fiction," and that "its speaker, like a character in a play, is no less a creation of the words on the printed page." Brower's first chapter is titled "The Speaking Voice"; its first heading is "The Speaker." It is indeed an *ur*-text for persona, cited as such in Abrams' bibliography. Here the space allotted to "the poet writing in his own person" has visibly contracted; Brower is considerably farther along the road to the Universal Speaker.

> The voice we hear in a lyric, however piercingly real, is not Keats's or Shakespeare's; or if it seems to be . . . we are embarrassed and thrown off as if an actor had stopped and spoken to the audience in his own person.

Description hardens into prescription. Poets may seem to speak in their own voices, perhaps they even do so in fact, but they shouldn't. Brower can accept it when Shelley in *Ode to the West Wind* comes on in "his familiar character of priest-prophet," but with "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!," "the dramatic fiction slips disturbingly: the allegory refers us too directly to Shelley's biography," though Brower concedes it is "only after the poem's high commotion is past that we feel the lapse." But however compelling the theatrical metaphor, those of us who remember how entirely, in the forties, we had learned to

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condescend to Shelley may suspect that it was less the slippage of the mask that embarrassed than the sentiment. There seems no reason, after all, why a priest-prophet in his familiar character can't feel sorry for himself. The unobtrusiveness of the human author has become a criterion, in poetry and in the novel as well; Brower reproves E.M. Forster for "somewhat portentous observations" which "in their unironic solemnity . . . are not altogether in character for the narrator of *A Passage to India*."

James would have committed no such gaffe. Four years later, Brooks and Wimsatt would identify the novelist's "problem of securing impersonality for his art," and ask, "How does the narrator avoid introducing himself into the work?" How? He does so by joining the speaker on stage. There sock and buskin conveniently separate him from authorial temptations to say what he thinks or feels, and readerly temptations to experience his statements unprotected by irony. Mechanisms of detachment tend to cluster.

Yet actual critical practice continues to resist such aesthetic austerity. In Brower's verbs, poets still speak for themselves. As he compares sonnets by Donne and Hopkins, "Hopkins calls directly on God for help"; "Donne . . . for all his queries, [is] certain of his close and passionate relation to Christ," while "Hopkins [is] tortured at the very center of his faith." There are no apologies for his near-lapse into biography. Though Brower asserts a distinction between speaker and poet, he makes it only when need compels, as it does in his discussion of *Love III*, where his use of "story-teller," "narrator," "sinner," and "guest" (not, however, "speaker") only underlines the difference between Herbert's dramatized and universalized encounter with divinity and Donne's and Hopkins' direct and personal address.

Brower was far too good a reader to sacrifice that difference to a theory; writing naturally of "the intimacy of Donne's prayer" in Holy Sonnet X, he reserved "the speaker" for the overtly dramatized situation of *The Ecstasie*. In fact, Brower seldom used the term. It appears in a discussion of the *Essay on Riches*, to be immediately cancelled by a reference to "Pope's ridicule." It is notably missing in the extended treatments of *Absalom and Achitophel*, of Yeats's *Two Songs*, even of *Surprised by Joy*, though a footnote is there to admonish us that "a biograph-

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ical reading, which the usual footnote to the poem invites, is altogether misleading and singularly unprofitable." Brower's transitional location between past naiveté and future rigor is marked by the doubled noun with which he concludes his discussion of the speaking voice: "the poet-speaker."

T.S. Eliot's "The Three Voices of Poetry," first published in 1953, is also cited as an *ur*-text for Persona. Actually to consult it, however, is to experience the retroactive power of an idea to compel us to misunderstand a text, indeed to reverse its meaning. Eliot in 1953 was writing plays, and far from making the dramatic voice the type of all poetic speaking, he was particularly concerned to distinguish it. He explicitly restricts the poet as persona to the third of his three voices, that actually to be heard on a stage. In the first voice, "the voice of private meditation," the poet is "talking to himself—or to nobody"; in the second, he is "talking to other people." Only in the third does the poet create "a dramatic character speaking in verse." Devotees of the universal persona may be startled to realize that by this Eliot does not mean dramatic monologue but actual drama, in which the poet is "saying . . . only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character," characters who have "equal claims" upon him, and whom, therefore, "he cannot wholly identify . . . with himself." In dramatic monologue, however, "it is surely the second voice, the voice of the poet talking to other people, that is dominant." Though metaphorically "he has put on costume and makeup," he hasn't really.

> Dramatic monologue cannot create a character. When we listen to a play by Shakespeare, we listen not to Shakespeare but to his characters; when we read a dramatic monologue by Browning, we cannot suppose we are listening to any other voice than that of Browning himself.

To the author of *Prufrock* it couldn't be clearer: "What we normally hear . . . in the dramatic monologue is the voice of the poet." Even in the play *The Rock*, the chorus was "speaking directly for me," speaking, moreover, in the second voice, the voice that Brooks and Brower found so off-putting but which Eliot here claimed as his own: "The voice heard in all poetry that has a conscious social purpose—poetry intended to amuse

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or instruct, poetry that preaches or points a moral"—that invites a reader, among other things, to consider whether what it says might be true. No wonder Eliot didn't say "the speaker."

But for all his influence, Eliot was not teaching English in American colleges. Brooks and Warren were; it is from their second edition, published in 1950, that I have quoted, and the memories of fifties graduates confirm that it was in that decade that the speaker permeated the diction of the English class. And as the decade progressed, critics became more aware of what they were doing; for their 1960 edition, Brooks and Warren revised their Nightingale section to eliminate those eleven occurrences of "the poet." They were less aware of why they were doing it. Though the invocation of "the speaker" harmonized with New Critical de-emphasis of biography and "conscious social purpose," the association was never explicit. Even in 1960 Brooks and Warren did not completely banish the poet; though Keats was speakerized, Marvell and Yeats were left alone.

Poems vary, however, in the insistence with which they solicit interest in their poet. Shakespeare's sonnets are notorious for inveigling critics into biographical lapses, and their treatment in what for convenience I will call the Brooks and Warren years demonstrates how consistently the use of "the speaker" correlates with the critic's biographical stance.

When Empson wrote in *Seven Types* that "Shakespeare is being abandoned by Mr. W.H. and stiffly apologizing for not having been servile to him," he was only continuing a tradition already well established when Wordsworth, or someone very like him, said that "with this key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart." (Naturally it was Browning who replied, "If so, the less Shakespeare he.") Even in 1941, in *The New Criticism* itself, John Crowe Ransom, trying to cool down Empson's "overreading" of Sonnet 73, was quite comfortable writing things like

> At this stage in the sequence, Shakespeare is melancholy. He finds the world evil and would like to die. His health is probably bad, for he refers to the likelihood of death.

Ten years later, Edward Hubler and Wilson Knight were still reading the sonnets as the expression of Shakespeare's per-

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sonal concerns; neither used "the speaker." But by 1963 the speaker is claiming an authority critics cannot ignore, though they vary in how consciously they recognize it. In Hilton Landry's *Interpretation in Shakespeare's Sonnets*, the speaker takes over, imperceptibly to the author, but before the reader's eyes.

As to biography, Landry is a fence-sitter. Though he applauds critical "efforts to dispose of the biographical school of sonnet criticism," he "cannot agree . . . that the poet's interests are not deeply involved," especially in view of Sonnets 40 and 41. And for the first half of his book the ancient locution comes naturally, as he writes of "Shakespeare's reluctance to blame a friend directly," of "Shakespeare asking the handsome youth, 'What is your substance, whereof are you made?'" "The sonnets which open the sequence urge the patron repeatedly to marry . . . but that was before Shakespeare's own dark lady seduced the patron." On page 63, however, the speaker makes a silent entrance; Sonnets 40, 41, and 42 now become "a trio of poems in which the speaker comments on aspects of a sexual triangle." For some ten pages thereafter poet and speaker coexist freely, in relation to the same poems and sometimes in the same paragraph. Then the balance tips. References to "the poet" and "Shakespeare" diminish, then disappear. By the end of Landry's book the speaker commands the field, with 27 instances in 24 pages. There has been no discussion of voice or persona, but the poet has slipped away.

The next year, when Murray Krieger came to the Sonnets, he not only said "speaker," but could be explicit about it: "Shakespeare presents us with a true lover . . . as his poet-persona." Poet-persona, lover, and Shakespeare are distinguishable, though still close; both Shakespeare and the speaker are poets, after all, so "the poet" can be written with something of the old ease. They may even both be lovers; once Krieger even slips into writing not that the speaker but "Shakespeare calls upon his friend" to accept "the blessing of parenthood." But for the rest his usage is both consistent and aware. How satisfyingly—and unexpectedly—the textual chase confirms personal history! It must have been just about 1964 that I got the news that poems were now to be talked about in a new way.

By 1968, the avowal of biographical interest has taken on a distinctly defensive coloration. Brent Stirling must confess on

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the first page of *The Shakespeare Sonnet Order* that "unlike some readers," he "would like to have some of the answers to the biographical mysteries." Stirling still feels easy saying "Shakespeare." So does Barbara Hernnstein Smith in her 1969 teaching edition: "The nature of Shakespeare's relation to the young man is addressed in many of the sonnets." James Winny, however, whose *The Master-Mistress* was published the same year, uses every argument he can think of to exclude a biographical reading, including the moral one (Shakespeare wouldn't have confessed anything so discreditable), and except when such references as "eternal lines" and "black ink" validate "the poet," he is careful to say "speaker."

In his 1969 *Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* and his 1977 edition of the poems, Stephen Booth has achieved full theoretical and practical consistency. Cooler than Winny, he jokes away any lingering biographical impurities. "Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter." Since Booth's interest is in linguistic rather than human events, he does not often refer to whoever it is that utters the poems, but when he does, as in the discussion of Sonnet 35, the entity who "blames himself" is "the speaker."

Hallett Smith's 1981 book on the sonnets is perhaps the best illustration of the newly traditional diction of detachment. He too thinks he hears Eliot's Voices; he begins *The Tension of the Lyre* by quoting the first one, "the poet talking to himself." Invisibly and immediately, however, it is transmogrified, paraphrased into "poems in which the poet seems to be talking to himself." That "seems" sums up the speaker's forty-year progress toward universal imperium. For Smith, "the focus is on the feeling of the speaker," "the speaker's love is like a fever"; "there is little evidence in the first seventeen sonnets that the speaker feels love for the person addressed." And it's not only the speaker who's grown dim in the aesthetic distance, he's taken his friend with him, "the audience of the poem, fictional though it probably is." Pluralized, fictionalized, reduced to an It—what a fate for "the person addressed"! When at length Smith "must now consider the character of the poet (or speaker)," the parenthetical addition must disinfect so intimate a contact, and we are at once admonished to restrict our

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interest. "The 'I' of the sonnets . . . may or may not bear a close resemblance to William Shakespeare, but he is a *persona* with identifiable traits." We can guess which we are to prefer. Art's impersonality is more manageable than the untidy spectacle of poets who claim to look into their hearts and write. When Smith is momentarily brought "very close to the conclusion that the speaker in the Dark Lady sonnets is a man named Will, and that we are to take that person as William Shakespeare," his only recourse is to change the subject.

Poets tend to view things differently. Eliot had insisted his verse spoke for him. John Berryman added his own emphasis: "One thing that critics not themselves writers of poetry occasionally forget is that poetry is composed by actual human beings. . . . When Shakespeare wrote, 'Two loves I have,' reader, he was *not kidding*." A qualification followed—it was 1962, and the tradition was hardening: "Of course the speaker can never be the actual writer, who is a person with an address" and other impedimenta he can't carry into the poem. Distinguishing person and persona, Berryman quoted Ransom's phrase, "the highly compounded authorial 'I'." But all he seemed to mean was that a poet (he was talking about Lowell's highly personal *Skunk Hour*) may speak for others besides himself. It may even be the persona that makes the speaking possible: in a few years, Berryman would be writing the *Dream Songs*. When Robert Pinsky, poet as well as critic, identified the distancing persona as one of modern poetry's "strategies for retaining or recovering . . . the tones of the forbidden language of Arnold or Tennyson," Berryman was his premier example of how a poet through a persona "can use the style which annoys or embarrasses him, but which for some purposes he needs—needs more or less for its original, affirmative purposes." Needs as we all do; driven, we use irony to bypass irony. Reader, Henry was *not kidding*.

Only occasionally did critics join poets to retard the speaker's progress. Irvin Ehrenpreis resisted his invasion of eighteenth-century studies; in 1963 (the year of Landry's silent shift) his brief essay, "Personae" insisted on what had never before required insistence, that the fictive work is written by "the real person," and "if he tells a story, we must ask what he (not his emanation) means by the story." But common sense appearing

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in an obscure festschrift and limiting its examples to Swift and Pope was not about to stop the tradition. Pinsky noted (in the mid-seventies) that speaking through a persona might "to a seventeenth-century reader . . . seem a bizarre way of writing poems of personal feeling"; he might have added that it might seem a bizarre way of talking about them. Indeed C.L. Barber, reviewing in 1978 Booth's books on the Sonnets, demurred briefly but explicitly from "those manuals of New Criticism" that "neatly separat[e] a 'speaker,' a dramatized presence, from the poet who mimes him," and argued gently that the "formalism" of Booth's interpretation ignored "human motives," "human gestures in the poems . . . that must reflect actual, . . . if somewhat obscure, personal relationships." Barber offered alternative interpretations which not only used the old locutions—as in "the poet's relation to the young man"—but depended on them. But these critical voices, eminent as they were, did not carry far. By 1981, the speaker's hegemony was so complete that John Reichert was impelled to ask, in a little-read but trenchant essay, "Do Poets Ever Mean What They Say?"

And it was in 1981 that my chase started, with the unyielding explanation of "Persona" I have quoted from the fourth edition of Abrams' *Glossary*—carried over unchanged, I was to find, from the third edition of ten years before. I had to take it as Abrams' own view; other entries made it clear enough when he disagreed with the ideas he summarized. Yet doubt nagged; could the critic I remembered really practice the antiseptic sophistication he seemed to mandate? I must find out how Abrams himself had been talking in the years when critics were learning to say "the speaker." Textual chases never end, but every chase at last must have a stop. Mine would stop here.

By now dates had become evidence; I did not expect to find a speaker in *The Mirror and the Lamp*. That marvelous book was published in 1953 and begun much earlier; I had read it as an unpublished doctoral dissertation in 1944. I checked; in it, Young, Boileau, and Pope (for a sample) came right out and "said" what they said in their poems; MacLeish made "a poetic statement"; Cowley even "sang," as poets were erstwhile wont to do. And so it was even in 1963; in the essay "Romanticism and the Spirit of the Age," Abrams regularly introduced poetic

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quotations by the simple "says" (Collins, Coleridge); Blake "complained to the Muses," and Wordsworth not only said and described, but insisted, dismissed, claimed and proclaimed, plainly pointed out, and bade farewell. Not for long, however. I could almost have predicted the date; if 1963 was for Landry the year of the speaker, for Abrams it was 1965. In "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric" we hear for the first time of "a determinate speaker . . . whom we overhear as he carries on . . . a sustained colloquy, sometime with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent."

The verbs are now all the speaker's—it is he who "achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem." In *Frost at Midnight*, the Coleridge who said things so readily only two years before has become "the meditative mind," "the solitary and wakeful speaker"; to the speaker, too, is attributed the childhood under review. Abrams' account of the *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* is equally fastidious: the poem "evokes in memory the lost self of the speaker's youth," and not Gray but the speaker "watches the heedless schoolboys at their games." When it's not the speaker who gets the verb, it's by a common alternate strategy, the poem itself, as "Keats's first long poem of consequence . . . represents what he saw, then thought, while he 'stood tiptoe upon a little hill.' " And no sooner has Abrams quoted William Lisle Bowes's clear statement that his sonnets "describe his personal feelings," than he rephrases it with the familiar dubiety; the sonnets "present a determinate speaker, whom we are invited to identify with the author himself." The word "persona" makes its expected appearance two pages later. The tradition is, it would seem, firmly in place.

And yet within the year Abrams' own speaker had returned to the limbo whence he came. In the 1966 essay, "Coleridge, Baudelaire, and Modernist Poetics," Wordsworth (in *The Prelude*) is describing, and without intermediary, "how, 'inspired by the sweet breath of heaven,' he assumed the prophet's sacred mission," and "calling on his fellow poet, Coleridge . . . to carry on with him 'as joint labourers in the work.' " Coleridge himself has reclaimed the right to say; the essay closes with him

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talking. " 'Joy,' he says . . . 'is the spirit and the power, / Which, wedding Nature to us, gives in dower, / A new Earth and new Heaven.' "

Though his *Glossary* explanation appeared for the first time in 1971, by 1972 Abrams' own poets had got back all their verbs. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, Shelley remarks and diagnoses; Coleridge dismisses, reveals, and reviews his life; Arnold asks; Eliot remarks, Auden makes a wry comment, Plath testifies, and Stevens enquires, rejects, and says, all in verse, and all *in propria*, as we used to say, *persona*. Wordsworth himself explains, announces (repeatedly), says, goes on to say, goes on to *pray*, puts it, feels, proclaims, and cries. Though Abrams of course recognizes when his poet speaks "through the medium of an invented character," and though he more than once discusses *Tintern Abbey*, there is no word of "the speaker who talks first to himself, then to his sister." When his sister is mentioned, in fact, the "his" refers directly to an antecedent "Wordsworth." Nor should we be surprised that Abrams couldn't keep his distance; that speaker is hardly consonant with the rich and humane contextuality of a critic the entire tenor of whose work opposes what he identified (in 1966, in "Coleridge, Baudelaire, and Modern Poetics") as "an aesthetic of an otherwordly, self-sufficient poem." It is characteristic, though odd, that when Abrams returned briefly to the idea of persona (in "Two Roads to Wordsworth," published like *Natural Supernaturalism*, in 1972), it was to praise it as an antidote to too much New Criticism, a concept which can "rehumanize poetry by viewing the poet, in Wordsworth's phrase, 'as a man speaking to men.' " But the reference to persona, though appreciative, is momentary. As with Brower, subject and verb tell the story, and through the seventies Abrams's speaker does not revive. Abrams's own *Norton Anthology* briskly returns to Coleridge the childhood he lost in 1965 as businesslike notes to *Frost at Midnight* inform the student that "The scene is Coleridge's cottage at Nether Stowey," "The infant in line 7 is his son Hartley," "The 'stern preceptor' . . . the Reverend James Boyer," and the "sister beloved" his sister Ann. And in an essay written as recently as 1983, Coleridge says, Wordsworth proclaims, and to provide the grand coda: "Shelley announced that

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The world's great age begins anew,
The golden years return."

And they yet may, if common sense keeps breaking in. But it's a long road back to innocence. I don't teach Great Books anymore, worse luck, but sometimes I teach Dante. This year, in a paper entitled "Textual Cocktails," I read that "the interplay of Dante-as-poet (as opposed to Dante-as-pilgrim, both poetic constructs of Dante-as-author), textualizes the Inferno." The young man who wrote that is a marvelous student and a marvelous person, brilliant, excitable, and excited about ideas. But I fear he has almost lost the capacity to ask naive questions. I miss my community college students. Though they weren't used to literature, they were, some of them, perhaps for that very reason, ready to take it into their lives with an astonishing, hungry directness. I learned from them what I won't forget. Newly born Renaissance readers, they were coming into their heritage, reading for the reasons Horace and Sidney knew, for profit and delight. For them art could still hold the mirror up to nature. I learned to value that prelapsarian trust, to doubt that any paradise I could promise within The Poem Itself would be happier far. Could I sniff, farther down the road, an even newer criticism, one in which author, history, truth, meaning itself would dissolve, an insubstantial pageant faded? Subversion, as an activity, is overrated; the community college showed me that I did not want, and do not want, to undermine the assumption of very young people that great authors speak great words, and that great words proffer wisdom. Abrams would be the last to disagree that although we should not hunt messages, we should be willing to recognize and honor them when they are found.

Of course the speaker is often a useful concept, sometimes a necessary one. The pervasive attention to voice has increased the subtlety with which we are able to read literary texts as well as the length at which we can write about them, articulating nuances before undiscussed, if not therefore unapprehended or unfelt. But let's be sensible. Here, for example, is a new book attributing to Emily Dickinson "a voice, which though it is surely not hers, is so intimately defined by her habits of mind that it encourages friendship, familiarity, even affection." I'm

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told it's not hers, but I'm never told why. I'm supposed to know. Well, I don't know. Of course, as Abrams explained in the *Glossary*, "the I . . . is not the author as he exists in his everyday life," and "in each of the major lyricists the nature of the persona alters, sometimes subtly and sometimes radically, from one of his lyrics to the next." But do we really need to be told that the poet in everyday life never tasted a liquor never brewed, or wandered where the Muses haunt, especially since in the latter case the poet actually *was* with darkness and with dangers compast round? Our gain in subtlety is a loss in human community if we succeed in detaching the utterance from the uttering tongue and mind and heart, not occasionally and provisionally but as a matter of course. For we are all utterers—teachers, critics, poets, people—and at issue is the fullness of human commitment not merely to literature but to language, and language's commitment to what as human beings we think and believe and want and need to say. As to altering from one utterance to the next, everybody does that all the time, as any collection of letters—Flannery O'Connor's, say—will confirm. You'd have to be pretty unsophisticated to believe that "the speaker who utters Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*" is the author as he exists in his everyday life, but you'd have to be more sophisticated than I care to be to believe he's not Keats at all. I would prefer my students to recognize that poets are just like folks, arted up a bit, perhaps, but still doing for the most part the same sort of thing their teachers do when they write an article, that they themselves do when without thinking they alter their tone for a parent or an employer or a friend. And although it is certainly possible to draw therefrom the conclusion that every voice is fictional, I do not care to press the point. It seems unnecessary for students to question the coherence of their own personalities because they write differently for the College newspaper and for me. Unleashed, the idea of the speaker takes on a terrifying applicability.

From that speaker it is only a step to the "novelistic, irretrievable, irresponsible figure" conjured up by Roland Barthes, "the Author himself—that somewhat decrepit deity of the old criticism," who plays at seeing himself as "a being on paper and his life as a *bio-graphy* . . . a writing without referent," "a text like any other." Or Foucault: "It would be as false to seek the author

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in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the 'author function' arises out of their scission—in the division and distance of the two." So quotation marks break out all over, as Derrida tells us that "it would be frivolous to think that 'Descartes,' 'Leibniz,' 'Rousseau,' 'Hegel,' etc. are the names of authors," and adds that the "indicative value" he attributes to them is only "the name of a problem." A problem indeed; a problem at once frivolous and dire, an intellectual heresy, a *trahison des clercs*. A concept that can assimilate the Milton who in darkness implored celestial light to shine inward to Lemuel Gulliver is a concept that devalues human personhood and human pain.

My voice has slipped; these notes have changed too much to tragic. Critics still use the names of poets naturally. Heartening inconsistencies still challenge critical rigor. Biography is back, albeit too often tricked out in such psychometaphysical garments as to obscure the human form divine rather than reveal it. If poets should reclaim the right (I quote Pinsky) "to make an interesting remark or speak of profundities, with all the liberty given to the newspaper editorial, a conversation, a philosopher, or any speaker whatever," even the inspirational and didactic may return: a recent issue of *The Hudson Review* contains an article on "the moral authority of poetry." And students, thank God, are ever virgin; each generation must be taught anew the mechanisms of detachment, or, as I'm told it's now called, distantiation. Left alone, it is no more possible to distance them from the human statement, from what Archibald MacLeish called "the human voice humanly speaking," than Brecht's epic gimmicks could insulate his audiences from Mother Courage.

Reading, rightly understood, is a relationship; we read, Auden said, "to break bread with the dead." "All methods of criticism and teaching are bad," wrote Northrop Frye, "if they encourage the persistent separation of student and literary work"; our job as teachers is to try our best to "weaken those tendencies within criticism which keep the literary work objective and separated from the reader." I would rather have students too naive than not naive enough. Distrust exacts a price, as when children are taught to refuse rides from strangers. We pay it as criticism metastasizes, as we read more and more cleverly, first looking behind masks, then discerning

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masks where no masks are, then persuading ourselves that the eyeholes are empty. Cleverness excludes, and distrust privatizes. Distrust of the text opens the way to elaborated and idiosyncratic readings, and to a criticism that legitimizes them, even as it delegitimizes the common and accessible experience it stigmatizes as naive. I want my students to hear voices, to recognize ambiguities—even, in moderation, ironies. I want them to experience the literary work as a thing well wrought. Yet I am conscious of the price. The "object for study" all too easily becomes "objective" in Frye's sense, a problem to be solved, not an utterance like our own.

In this process, I believe the speaker has played an unobtrusive but influential part. I have for my last years as a teacher my own project of subversion, my target the sophistication that compasses me round. Fortunately it's not impossible, if you're confidently old-fashioned enough, to reactivate a nineteen-year-old's naiveté. Dante, as ever, is a great help, Dante all tangled in biography and history, Dante the author, Dante the pilgrim, Dante the poet of many voices, who in Canto XX of the *Inferno* uses his own to tell us how to read a poem:

> *Se Dio ti lasci, lettor, prender frutto*
> *di tua lezione, or pensa per te stesso*
> *com' io potea tener lo viso asciutto . . .*

"Reader, so may God grant you to gather fruit of your reading, think now for yourself how I could keep my cheeks dry. . . ." Do we think it was only the poet's emanation that wept? Think of the poet's emotion, reader, so you can share it. If you want to gather the fruit of your reading, take care how you interpose with poetic constructs, especially those you yourself have constructed. Listen very carefully to what Dante is saying. Consider, even, that it might be in some sense true.

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SONYA RUDIKOFF

An American Woman of Letters

To have both mother and father die at the same time or close together is terrible at any age, but to suffer that double bereavement at the age of six is surely cruel beyond measure. Throughout history, countless children have suffered the loss of parents and homes, in wars, revolutions, famines, plagues, earthquakes, and other disruptions, which of course does not soften the horror and confusion felt by each individual child. A girl of six whose parents were stolen by the 1918 influenza epidemic, who was separated from her brothers, who was placed with unloving foster parents, who grew up as nobody's child—surely, that series of traumas is almost incredible. In circumstances so unfavorable, a child's attempts to make something of life must be considered especially brave and commendable. Still, it would not be surprising if such a childhood history were buttressed by false imaginings and fantastic identities that might be invented for solace or support. In the absence of the natural reciprocity and correction that family life often provides for more fortunate children, orphans frequently develop forms of hysterical behavior and seeming rationality to organize their lives, invented selves and invented histories with the appearance of plausibility. It is in such a perspective that Mary McCarthy's career as a woman of letters may be seen, with greater clarity than in the usual account stressing her singularity. *She* was the child who lost her parents in the 1918 epidemic, who grew up in misery, who made something of herself.

She has told most of the story herself, in her autobiographical stories, when they were published separately, and then in 1942, when they appeared as chapters in *The Company She Keeps*. She continued with autobiographical stories, memoirs, and autobiographical novels; in literary and theatre criticism she had gained early notoriety for incisive irreverent confrontation. Her most recent memoir, projected as the first of

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three volumes, appeared in 1987.[1] During these past forty-five years she has also published reportage, and individual essays of personal reminiscence. She has frequently been the subject of journalistic studies, as well as of several biographies, most recently the massive *Mary McCarthy: A Life*, by Carol Gelderman.[2] The reading public has been repeatedly enlightened about Mary McCarthy's early life in Seattle, her childhood in Minneapolis, where she endured almost Dickensian horrors of brutality and neglect among bigoted Catholic relatives, her rescue by a Protestant grandfather in Seattle, and her intellectual salvation by the nuns in a Sacred Heart convent; then there was her brief foray into a public high school, and her safer haven in a Tacoma boarding school, modeled on well-known girls' schools in the East. From Mary McCarthy's memoirs, as well as other sources, readers know a lot about her years at Vassar, her unfortunate first marriage, her entrance into the theatrical and bohemian life of New York of the thirties, her marriage to Edmund Wilson, and her emergence in the world of the early *Partisan Review*, and its matrix of political and cultural controversy. A third marriage followed after the Second World War, and a more varied international life, which found its way into her work. There were books on Venice and Florence, and European friends. Political questions continued to absorb her, and there were lectures and visits to Eastern Europe; later she would go to Hanoi, and would enter the troubled controversy over Vietnam, engaging in public disputation about the war with other intellectuals. There was a fourth marriage, a very happy one, finally, and a more settled life divided between Paris and Maine.

Writing steadily during all these years, Mary McCarthy has never been out of the public eye, and during 1980–84 she was very much more in it, following her accusations against Lillian Hellman during a television interview with Dick Cavett. The subsequent lawsuit and the publicity about it occupied her for some time, until Lillian Hellman suddenly died and the libel suit was withdrawn. Public attention since then

[1] HOW I GREW, by *Mary McCarthy*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $16.95; $8.95.
[2] MARY McCARTHY: A Life, by *Carol Gelderman*. St. Martin's Press. $24.95.

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has accompanied her frequent lectures, honors, and awards, assessments of contribution to literature and culture, and summaries of her achievement. During the early eighties, she suffered serious health problems (she is 76), but has continued to teach during part of the year at Bard College, where she taught first in 1945, brought there by F. W. Dupee, of the early *Partisan Review* circle. She has received the National Medal of Literature, and is a member of the American Institute of Arts and Letters, and since December 1988, of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Biographies of persons still living are difficult to write and to read. The subject of this one cooperated very generously, providing information and useful material about herself. Others who were part of the story have also been made part of the research. The biography is long and detailed, with careful identification of people in Mary McCarthy's milieu, quotation of letters, elaboration of travel plans and house moving, and with 56 pages of notes. The bibliography is skeletal however, lacking dates when the writer's work was first published, and without even a selected list of secondary sources, although some are cited in the notes. Carol Gelderman has conducted lengthy interviews with many of the family members and old school friends whose life stories Mary McCarthy drew upon for her fiction, has examined records at Vassar, at the Tacoma boarding school, the Sacred Heart school in Seattle, and the convent school in Minneapolis; hundreds of people have conferred with her, searching their memories and providing copies of their correspondence with the writer; and altogether almost everything pertinent has been tracked down, including the middle name of the third husband. Unfortunately, it results in a longish book which does not really enlighten the reader.

Perhaps the biographer cannot gain sufficient distance on her subject, because Mary McCarthy is still living and was very helpful. The book begins so frankly from admiration that it fails to confront some of the serious problems of biography as a literary form. It reads inevitably as special pleading, or promotional material, almost as if it were written by the subject herself. Even the critical bits suit her well-known habit of public confession. Intensive interviewing of the writ-

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er's relatives and friends then becomes a part of this promotion; the biographer's interpretations are governed more by the directions outlined in Mary McCarthy's own memoirs and autobiographical fictions, than by a critical social and historical understanding of the subject. The people, places and events described are not really re-created, because they are not seen apart from the subject's view of them. Despite extraordinary efforts to recover the early Seattle and Minneapolis years, the seemingly muddled and graceless arrangements which placed the young Mary with uncongenial relatives, and the formative years of suffering, her biographer cannot get outside the young Mary's consciousness; later in the book, it is the older Mary's consciousness and convictions that are imprisoning. The result is a stupendous amount of detail, but little palpable reality.

Mary McCarthy has always stimulated intense reactions in readers and critics, part of the nuance of notoriety that her name evokes. The biography's treatment of this matter fails to deal with it adequately. More than many contemporary writers, Mary McCarthy's personae and her writing have seemed to invite attack, for daring, irreverence, heartlessness. There have always been supporters and admirers who applauded that daring and irreverence, who in fact relished her satire of others, and marveled at her scrutiny of persons and institutions cherished by educated people—a progressive college, a circle of intellectual friends, a summer colony, a political and cultural battle. Those exposés—*romans à clef* of the intellectual world, with keys attached—notoriously used her friends' lives for material, barely disguising the details needed for the picture. Personal habits, character traits, beliefs, motives, ideology, physique and life histories were freely plundered. Identifications were easily made even by those who knew only a little about New York, Wellfleet, Bard, Vassar, and the other sites and persons subject to scrutiny. Those who were more familiar with the milieux dissected in those stories and novels not surprisingly disliked the pillage of their lives. Mary McCarthy did not scruple to impale her closest and oldest friends, and they have often made the most pointed attacks in reply, as when Dwight Macdonald, the political and cultural critic, her old friend, the founder and editor of

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politics, compared Mary McCarthy's famous smile with the smiles of other women, whom he felt were warm and engaging: Mary McCarthy's smile, he observed, was that of a shark, and he underlined the point further by adding that it made him feel as if his fly were undone.

This twentieth-century woman's wit has always brought out a battery of such threatening images from reviewers and critics—teeth, rapiers, swords, even stiletto and bayonet. Her savage satiric inspection of contemporary culture was liable to be performed on anyone or anything, seeming to know no bounds. She was thought to exult in the bold destruction of others' *amour propre*, in her cold, "cerebral," heartless, cutting, acid approach to life. The title of a 1950 collection of stories and memories, *Cast a Cold Eye*, was taken by critics to be self-descriptive, as Robert Lowell predicted, and its source in a Yeats verse ignored. Her chilly merciless gaze on the world around her then became the thing she was known for, both in fiction and reportage, and repeatedly she would be asked to satisfy the appetite she herself had created. People who met her were surprised to find she could be charming and even kind; later, when she did not seem to speak in the voice known from her writing, reviewers found that she had "mellowed"!

Although Mary McCarthy had arrogated to herself a right to dissect and satirize, she failed to understand her friends' objections to her portrayal of them, in fact was *wounded* by their objections! When family members she had lost touch with protested her use of their lives in the early memoirs or stories, she would reply by wrapping heself in the mantle of the creative artist. Some friendships were terminated. Claiming innocence of intent to harm, Mary McCarthy would throw herself on the mercy of an unspecified court. At the same time she would add to her list still another place, group, or person who would no longer welcome her: it seemed that her writing was too strong, fearless and honest for the self-protective people who disliked her irrepressible candor. In her own reckoning, her satiric gift was a kind of compensation for injuries received in childhood; but she also believed she had *earned* the right to mock others, no matter who was hurt, because she had paid for it in advance by her earlier

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suffering.[3] She did not appreciate others availing themselves of the same privilege however, even when they may have claimed comparable early pain; when parodies of her work appeared, she felt deeply injured. Old friends who did not protest, abandon her, or respond in equivalent acts of satire, could expect little response to *their* pain, as, for example, Elizabeth Bishop realized, when she thought elements of her personal life had been used in 1963 in *The Group*. In the 1987 memoir, her old Vassar friend denies doing so but Elizabeth Bishop died in 1979 believing it. In the fifteen years that followed the publication of that most notorious of the exposé novels, which used the old Vassar friends for material, Mary McCarthy had not found the opportunity to correct her old friend's impression. Mary McCarthy thought that her own history had dried out her feelings, and the misunderstanding with Elizabeth Bishop clearly demonstrates how her absence of feeling worked out: "Well! I am sad about all that," she observed in *How I Grew*, "but not very, since it does not affect my love for her work and her, too." That it might have affected Elizabeth Bishop, whether alive or dead, is, amazingly, not part of the picture.

Some of Mary McCarthy's friends have known her to be kind, endearing, generous, devoted, loyal, childlike in her enthusiasms, spirited and companionable, as if contradicting her own comments on her desiccated feelings. She is well-known as a cook and gardener, with an uncommon devotion to those tasks, methodical and thorough. Others regard her satiric gifts as essential armor in a rough world, perhaps used to advantage by an independent woman before the second feminist movement of recent years. As her entire career illustrates, Mary McCarthy has never lacked defenders or supporters, and, despite the negative reception provoked by much of her work, the poor reviews and (with the exception of *The Group*) generally poor sales, she has always had a group of loyal readers, and publishers who have published her work, apparently indifferent to the alleged importance of the bottom line.

[3] The reader cannot help but recall here Edmund Wilson's ideas relating the artist's suffering to the art, in his somewhat mechanical theory of the wound and the bow.

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How I Grew, the first of three projected volumes of memoirs, indicates how that support may have injured her. Thus, the entire conception of a long memoir by a writer who has already written so much about her childhood and youth should have been thought through more carefully, but perhaps that support prevented such candor. The writer herself was aware that she had used this material extensively, so she compressed or distorted the old familiar incidents and portrayals. Perhaps thinking of Wordsworth, she decided to write about the past by recounting the growth of her own mind. Indeed, the memoir begins "I was born as a mind during 1925, my bodily birth having taken place in 1912." Unfortunately, the result is not poetry but lists: the books she read as a child, in the Sacred Heart school, in the public high school, at boarding school, in each of her classes at Vassar; catalogues of boys she went out with, facts and definitions, recital of trains going from Seattle to the East. When the reader of the memoir looks for a thoughtful account of emotional change, or of experience, the writer responds with lists, with disquisitions, with geographical facts, with the smart performance always praised by the nuns and the "darling" teachers at Vassar. This flurry of reading lists obscures the reader's need to know how the subject of the memoir became the person who wrote the memoir, how, in the tradition of the form, the writer changed from one sort of person to another. It is a need to know imaginatively and emotionally, which remains unsatisfied. Mary McCarthy awkwardly engages her own memory, as if obedient to the memoir tradition, but the material of her childhood and youth has been so thoroughly drenched with satire and anathema that the world of its actual feelings cannot be summoned. Instead, there is the recourse familiar to readers of her autobiographical fiction, the introduction of "daring" material: here it is the story of her loss of virginity at the age of fourteen. In *The Group*, in 1963, it was candid talk about sexual experience, and the then daring account of obtaining contraceptives. The defloration was without meaning for her, as was a subsequent experience, and depends for its effectiveness on an impersonal description of the man's use of a condom and the girl's lack of feeling for the man. He was "an older man" of twenty-three, and

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she had lied about her age. Then, at seventeen, she reports, she "lost her virginity for the third time." The avowal of deliberate inaccuracy, and of her absence of feeling, is intended to pass as more honest than another treatment of the incident might be. Mary McCarthy thus anticipates the reader's reaction by taking the offensive, in her own version of the Baudelairean snare. It has been her most effective device, employed as early as *The Company She Keeps* in 1942, especially in "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," with (for its time) an even more deliberately "daring" account of sex in a Pullman car. Standards of what is daring, mentionable, or unmentionable in print have changed radically since 1963, and even more so since 1942 (or 1857!); the challenge thrown down by such pre-emptive confessions, however, remains what it was 25, 46 or 131 years ago, a way of forcing readers or *semblables* to put themselves *à nu*. But did no editor see that this reversion to earlier devices would undermine the feeling of the memoir?

And then there are all those foolish errors and infelicitous expressions, surprisingly numerous in a writer often celebrated for her style. Surely she demeans herself in those arch comments tying the material together—"Hold on!" and "But stop!" and "To get back to that," and "But I am anticipating"—or the incongruous and mannered appeals to "Dear Reader," which drain even more meaning from her familiar material. Other interruptions and discontinuities produce an equally unpleasant effect, such as insisting on telling the reader how to pronounce the name of a Renaissance poet, or displaying her knowledge of French verbs, rapping the reader's knuckles—"(note correct use of word)"!—or pertly calling attention to her edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*—the good 1911 one, of course!—by noting that it is "only one year older than I," which makes her then stumble into her own incorrect usage. Never has that inimitable frosty punitive tone of the prize pupil been so unrelieved, so unmodulated! Were the editors dozing when they read her uninformed comments about Presbyterian church services, or her showy chatter about Chaucer, the Venerable Bede, and "the wonderful Caedmon (fl. 670 at Whitby)"? Nearly sixty years later, she is wondering whether she heard Caedmon's hymn first in its Northumbrian version or in English, and cannot resist telling

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the reader that a West Saxon version exists too! How could an editor fail to blue-pencil the whole willful and silly discussion of private schools, and the ignorant inept analysis of class, culture, and education, with its absurd assertions about intellectuals and elites? Was no one paying attention when the galleys came through with "But I am digressing in the middle of a digression, piling Ossa on Pelion, as we Latinists would say"? If this were not a memoir, but a satirical novel about a boarding school girl showing off, the authorial voice might have been distinguished from the other voices, providing an ironic commentary, but what we are hearing here *is* the authorial voice! How could her editors have permitted this winner of the National Medal for Literature to make herself so ridiculous and to sully her own vocation?[4]

Whether because of an editorial failure, or a tangle of errors occurring earlier, this capable writer has received very poor service from those who have encouraged her latest autobiographical endeavor. Throughout more than fifty years of a literary career, Mary McCarthy has never been without supporters, mentors, admirers. Edmund Wilson, brutal as a husband, according to the biography, nevertheless admired and encouraged her writing, Philip Rahv and others in the *Partisan Review* world were similarly encouraging; and, after her early debut as a theatre critic, there was a specific public that responded to her style, her cleverness, her daring, her spirit, and her satire. Even the admiring biographer agrees, however, that *How I Grew* is a disappointment, an embarrassment, with its silly title, and its self-demeaning postures.[5] Reviewers were not kind to the book, and were irritated by its tone, its obsessive irrelevant detail, its reliance on earlier McCarthy material, its inconsequence. As the biographer notes, this writer has never had very good reviews; most of her books were poorly received, and some were even ignored entirely.

[4] Surely it must be a joke that the memoir has an appendix entitled "Brief Biographical Glossary of Lesser-Known Figures." Lesser-known than whom? It includes Maréchal Foch, the World War I hero, Laurette Taylor, the actress, Eugene Meyer, publisher of the *Washington Post*, Helen Wills and Helen Jacobs, tennis stars of the twenties and thirties . . . How could this have escaped the editorial eye?

[5] How ill-advised she was to choose that title, th its echo of a children's book first published in 1881, *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*! Or was she thinking of Topsy, who "jes' growed," in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?

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Still, the memoir was published. Did some editor believe that its structure will be revealed at the end of the third volume, as in Dante? Is the young Mary McCarthy of the first volume a naive pilgrim struggling through a dark wood?

All this autobiographical ground, all this personal anecdotal past, had been gone over so many times, by Mary McCarthy in her numerous stories and recapitulations, and explicitly in her 1957 *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, and by all those who have written about her, that perhaps nothing more can be learned or extracted, certainly not when pursued in this way. So many people have been interviewed, so many memories dredged up, so many incidents reviewed, so many reading lists disinterred! To go over yet once more the memories of a few Vassar girls, without any demonstrated awareness of where they stood in the world surrounding them, only aggravates the already claustral atmosphere of the biography. What really needs to be brought into sharper focus now is a social and historical insight into the material, drawn from outside the material, and less of the automatic literary or psychological reminiscence. For example, a more sophisticated knowledge of the history of women's education in the United States could provide the outlines for a different view of what it meant when the young woman from Seattle went to Vassar in 1929. Greater knowledge of Vassar history, of Barnard, Smith, Radcliffe, and other women's colleges, would have anchored in a context the story of one individual girl who went East to Vassar in the fateful autumn of the Crash and graduated in 1933 in the depths of the Depression. That context would have also included, peripherally, a female population of more than 60 million in the United States in those years. More pertinent and more immediate would have been the 5 million women of college age, of whom perhaps 5% would graduate from institutions of higher learning, and not only from Vassar, Radcliffe, Smith, and Barnard, but also from all the large universities in the Middle West and West, and the small denominational colleges which trained both women and men.

Mary McCarthy has expressed firm opposition to feminism, insisting that it was never an issue in her life or career. Had her biographer examined this matter more critically, and not merely admired what her subject has *said* about it, she could

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never have summarized her subject's experience so naively as she did: "Of course, there is no 'woman' problem in the circles she moves in . . ."! It is hard to know what can possibly be meant by this in 1989, especially in light of Mary McCarthy's own 1963 statement that in the late thirties the *Partisan Review* editors "accepted me, unwillingly, as an editor because I . . . was the girl friend of one of the 'boys', who had issued a ukase on my behalf . . ." She said then that she used to go down to the office on Saturdays and "listen to the men argue." In their view, she remained "absolutely bourgeois throughout," and her position on the magazine was, as she put it, "lowly." She was an editor for three issues, and was given theatre criticism to do, a frivolous pursuit, despite recent disclaimers by those involved at the time. She was an editor for three issues; why did she not remain an editor? And if, in those circles there was no "woman" problem—the very phrase speaks volumes!—where in fact were all the other women? Even though in the early thirties only a small fraction of the entire female population was educated, there were nevertheless nearly 55,000 women who graduated from college annually, so, by the late thirties, there must have existed more than just *one* young woman capable of editing an avant-garde magazine and writing for it! Surely, among the New York intellectuals during that time and later, some of the many people interviewed could have resolved this puzzle. But, Mary McCarthy's biographer has proceeded as if her subject's life history is to be understood only *sui generis*, with no resemblance to the life of any other woman, whether writer, intellectual, artist or other professional, or clerical or manual worker, or unemployed housewife. It is interesting and rather startling to note that 1963, when *The Group* was published, was also the year when *The Feminine Mystique* appeared, inaugurating a new and significant stage in the women's movement. That no effort is made in the biography to acknowledge this, or to discuss critically any of its important and obvious implications, indicates the kind of intellectual misconception pervasive throughout the book. In fact, conceivably, Mary McCarthy's life and work can be understood *only* in the context of the lives of other women, more specifically the lives of the other educated women of her generation.

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LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

Courtship of the Jersey Lineman

Stan and
Monica. Monica and Stan. Met last year
in Jersey
at shoulder-heave battering ram. She scored highest wielding
the heavy steel mallet. Monica kept slamming the Muscle-
man bell at the top
of the tower of sputtering white lights lined-up in a row.
A trick snap of her wrists?
No mere fluky swing! She rang the topmost bell three times in quick

succession.
He struck the respectable He-Man level,
two full notches
below *her* Hercules pinnacle. . . . Secretly, she loved the way
he curled his upper lip in a pout—a man who lost, often,
yet never felt whipped.
But oh he was menaced, *wasted,* from the moment he set eyes
on the purple butterfly
tattoo, wholly visible, exposed on her thigh, blooming just under

the crossed
ties of her bikini shorts. . . . Stan—back home
in Passaic—
is a lineman who straps iron crampons to his shoe bottoms
and carries electric meters on a sling around his neck
when he shinnies up poles
to run routine checks, or repair hitches in wires and cables
that feed power to the trains—
both subway and elevated . . . Often, after dates Monica tagged along.

Night shifts,
she kidded with him on homemade walkie-talkies,
while he spooled out
the fresh coils of wire, re-working many a faulty circuit.
So went the drift of their shy slow courtship. They anatomized
shifting wind directions, howls
altered to whistling, the steady whine of taut wires in hard gales,

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the crackle of slack wires in gusts.
One or the other would warn the radar-mate of sudden belly wallops,

hard blows due
to arrive in six to eight seconds of their stop-
watches' slow dials.
She might walk ahead a quarter mile, a half mile, and report
weather conditions back to him down the line, ten or twenty
high power poles behind.
They played so earnestly at relaying the weather crisis bulletins—
divulged with such exact scrutiny
of details—he often forgot it was a private game they'd improvised!

His safety,
perched on the upper pole ladder rungs, depended—
wholly—on her air
current accounts, her accurate samplings of moisture levels
and shifting forms of precip—rain, sleet, hail, snow, duststorm,
or freezing rain—each variant
posing a different hazard to the lineman; and she marvelled
at the exquisite fine shadings
in his tactile sense, his dexterity with hairsbreadth twists and twines

of wire-ends;
while she dreaded the risks of sparking, outage,
short circuit,
overheating and burnout, or actual flash fires on the line.
Despite his huge puffy asbestos insulated gloves, he knew
the touch of every line quirk,
eyes averted. . . . The days she stayed home sick, or indolent,
he felt deserted. None of his tools
worked right: the shears' edge dulled, the soldering iron stayed cold,

the nail heads
always crumpled too soon, leaving the nails
half-in, half-out
of the power poles. . . . When they'd met at the hammer-slugger's stall
at the County Fair, the play grew serious at once, a work of love
between them. Blows of the steel
hammer head sparked an electric shining of skin-tingling rush
between two unacknowledged opponents,
before either spoke a word. Now his work had turned up new forms of play

they shared.
She loved to work the coastal rocks near Passaic
Falls, and she climbed
ledges to inspect large bird nests in cliff-top eyries. She chose

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the most unscalable shelves, or those which looked impassable
to her lineman, atop his pole
in the distance, who waved back to her in amazement at the surprise
pinnacle of each new feat of rock-
scrabbling, his binoculars at a loss to pick out any entryway, as if

she'd floated
the last twenty yards' ascent on wings of the chatter
which kept circulating
between their two sets of ear phones; she taking a true zeal
in finding higher roosts to mount than nearby public works towers,
or the railways' controls towers
he had to monitor from topmost footrests. What an elation
she felt waving down to him! Or waving
back to the townspeople and schoolchildren, who greeted her with awe

and disbelief
(as they might an unfamiliarly plumaged new species
of gull) through windows
of trains speeding out of tunnel mouths. She felt like a flasher
when the train crowds ogled her, but never displayed the cobra
tattoo on her left buttock
to train-loads of passengers roaring past, though she'd often tease Stan
with threats of such masqueradery.
Which he pretended to ignore. But he leered at her in expectant shame

as trains drew
near to the unexpected sideshow she offered
to private first-class
car, economy coach, and diner, alike. . . . They married. She'd
returned to her half-time job as ticket taker at the Fair,
and he missed her twin eagle
companionship on the job, the freedom they shared: he flying
from pole to pole wound in his coils
of ropes and cables; she scrabbling like a mountain goat in crannies,

cliff dugouts.
They were two high-flyers off the Jersey seacoast!
They spread their arms wide
from respective towers, to wave blessings, to keep their balance,
but wider, to embrace the day's happy expanse as great sea birds
soar on outspread wings for long
and long riding of the currents—these, too, rode out the rise and fall
of northwesterly wind currents,
rode out the laughter and technical data and witty repartee that passed

between them,

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sizzled along the sparking wires of the two-way
radio receivers (capped
with short three-segmented antennae) they carried. Oh they rode out
the mounting waves of mutual desire in this rare aerial stilt-
walking flirtation and courtship,
beckoning to each other over bridges, across river channels, ditches,
and waving flares, when other forms
of visual contact between them failed; his next moves always plotted

in advance,
mapped out by the company railroad's computer
printout of key snags
on the line needing emergency repairs. But *her* itinerary
of hikers' trails, daring zigzags, ascents and descents, followed
an ever-changing impromptu
pattern of swerves. She might pursue a course parallel to his job
circuit—a mirror image, perhaps.
Or she might be prompted to follow her own pure whimsy and caprice.

The radio
contact that linked them was never interrupted,
not even when he donned
scuba-diving gear and performed delicate underwater rewirings,
all equipment sealed airtight, waterproofed . . . But she couldn't bear
to see him *fry* that day, his face
lit with a charge that might have killed a man who had not, as had he,
in eight years' service on the line,
built up immunity to electrocution, as some have inured their guts

to huge doses
of poison, by absorbing at least a dozen
high voltage shocks
on the job. He'd shown her the eyebrow permanently erased
by the livewire's instant deep-fry, the long scar taking a couple
of snake loops around his wrist
and forearm. One side or the other of the white double S-curve
could be taken for wounds of a knife-
fight, but the winding curves of the scar were telltale electric snake

whiplash marks . . .
Even so, she wasn't prepared for the exploding star
of light which commenced
as a tiny fireflysized bulb of yellow, and inflated. It grew—
in one long second—into a dazzling sphere of phosphorescent gold,
its aura surrounding his whole
ladder-top figure bent over forward, starkly silhouetted
in a grasshopper's crouch, arms curled

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over his head to ward off the blast! He vanished, utterly, from view

for two seconds
(longer, perhaps, the flash blinding to she who stared
hard at the flaming core
and did not flinch), as if his whole body mass disintegrated,
churned into gold-leaf excelsior blossoms. She turned away,
already catching the stench
of his singed hair, burnt skin, braced to meet *death's face*. But he,
making no sound, had belt-shinnied
halfway down the pole, shaking his head and patting one side of his face

like a swimmer
flushing water from a plugged ear; then he blinked
again and again, each time
harder: "No, I'm not in pain," he pleaded. "Not burnt bad.
Not dying. These flashes happen. But I'm blinded worse this time.
Can't seem to open my eyes atall."
And the pops had deafened one ear. His eyes still stuck together,
she led him home—whacking his bum ear
with the heel of his palm. Next day, after five or six eyewash rinsings,

sight returned,
his ears still ringing, but not loud enough to drown
her howls. He must quit
his job! "No problem," he says. "Those loose-circuitry sparks
and blown transformer blasts are all bark, no bite. Knocks me out
for a day or two, at the outside."
Open-handed, she boxed him on *both* ears, and wept—then fell, dead away,
in a faint. And foreswore their engagement.
Back to the fairgrounds box office for her. . . . Next week, they married.

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CARL DJERASSI

Two Autobiographical Sketches

"Dear Mrs. Roosevelt . . . "

That's how I finally started the letter, after rejecting several more flowery salutations. "Your Excellency" was the one I'd considered most seriously. After all, to me, sixteen years old, a refugee from Hitler, just arrived on these shores, she was clearly Queen of America, the woman who could make things happen with the mere wave of her wand. But her shy smile and buckteeth—I'd studied them in countless newspaper photographs—convinced me that such a populist queen would be most comfortable with a simple, everyday sort of address. "Dear Mrs. Roosevelt," I wrote, not guessing in my wildest imagination that this letter would launch me on the lecture circuit in the Cornbelt.

It was early 1940, weeks after I'd landed in New York City aboard the liner *Rex* (soon to be sunk in the war). "I am writing already now because in September I must have a scholarship to continue my schooling. . . . " Decades later, my spoken and written English is still sprinkled with "already now"—a verbal wart from a German-speaking childhood: *schon jetzt*. Never mind the touch of redundancy, the idiomatic flavor. When I make reservations already now for next winter's holiday, I do so because my "now" feels naked and incomplete without the security of an "already."

Grudgingly, I accepted the fact that pressing affairs of state might prevent my letter from rising instantaneously to the top of Mrs. Roosevelt's pile of correspondence. Still I had to admit to a touch of disappointment when a brief reply finally arrived from the Institute for International Education to which she had forwarded my request. It took several months before my faith in the limitless power of that most democratic

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of all queens was restored in the form of a postcard from an officer of the Institute. "I have some good news for you. You have been awarded a scholarship for the next semester at Tarkio College in Tarkio, Missouri."

My first exposure to spoken English came from a teacher in Vienna who had a touch of savoir-faire about him when he mispronounced American place names. His careful enunciation of "Seekaygo, Illinoa" made an indelible impression on me. To this day, my neurons fire whenever I fly to O'Hare Airport and hear the captain announce over the intercom our impending landing in "Sheekahgo." No wonder I managed to give "Missouri" a Viennese ring when I announced to my mother that I was heading west to a town I couldn't find on any map then at my disposal. Even the Greyhound ticket office in New York had some difficulty before discovering that the northwestern corner of Missouri was my ultimate destination. St. Joseph ("Saint Jo, Masura" to the natives) was the city where Greyhound deposited me after changes in Pittsburgh and Kansas City, and where I transferred to a local bus that eventually passed the sign "Welcome to Tarkio, Queen of the Cornbelt." That was the town where I launched my career as a public speaker at the age of seventeen.

Within hours of my registration at Tarkio College—a Presbyterian school where a God-fearing student body of 140 was guided by a faculty of twenty (including the business manager, a house mother, and the superintendent of grounds)—I learned a piece of historical lore which seemed a superb omen to a budding chemistry major like myself: Tarkio's most illustrious alumnus was none other than Wallace Carothers, the inventor of Nylon. No one mentioned that he'd committed suicide just a few years after making his discovery.

Mrs. Roosevelt would have been flabbergasted if she'd learned what else Tarkio taught me during the one semester that I spent at the Queen of the Cornbelt before transferring to Kenyon College. At the end of my first week, the program chairman of the Tarkio Rotary Club invited me to address its membership on "The Current Situation in Europe." "Invite" may be a euphemism. He informed me that I was scheduled to address the local members who had contributed to my scholarship. They were curious to inspect the recipient of

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their largesse. I was too nervous and too innocent of public speaking even to imagine the many pitfalls a teenaged, city-bred kid might face in front of an audience of middle-aged farmers and businessmen. However, I was not too innocent to plagiarize ruthlessly John Gunther's *Inside Europe*. His reference to the Balkans—"Must every little language have a country all its own?"—still sticks in my mind.

My peculiar accent gave the speech an air of authenticity that no one—even one who knew the facts—could possibly resist. Its Viennese base from "Seekaygo, Illinoa" days had been contaminated by my exposure, during my last year in Europe at the American College in Sofia, to Bulgarian-speaking classmates whose Slavic assaults on the English language had yielded little to the British and American accents of the faculty. Already in sophisticated New York City, I'd learned that to the incessant inquiry "where're you from?" the single word "Bulgaria" was a much more mysterious answer than "Vienna." Even the inhabitants of rural "Masura" had heard of *Schnitzel* and Strauss waltzes. But Bulgaria? It was a safe bet that few Tarkioites could even name the four countries bordering on Bulgaria.

At the end of my Rotary debut, the minister of the local Presbyterian church congratulated me on my performance and proposed that I give a similar talk to his congregation after his Sunday sermon. In order not to repeat myself, I rushed back to my source—*Inside Europe* was not only up to date but also full of entertaining tidbits—and shamelessly borrowed new material which I dressed up in my Viennese-Bulgarian-British accent. This second talk propelled me almost overnight from amateur to professional status. In the minister's office that Sunday, with an apologetic reference to the size of the offering, my pleased host shoved the contents of the collection plate—nickels, dimes, and occasional quarters—in my direction. It was my first lecture honorarium.

The ministerial grapevine apparently crossed denominational boundaries. From that Sunday on I received almost weekly invitations to address various church groups in northwestern Missouri and southwestern Iowa about "The European Situation." My plagiarism of Gunther became more sophisticated. I mixed his journalistic wisecracks, such as his defini-

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tions of *Balkan Peace* ("a period of cheating between two periods of fighting") or *Balkan Revolutions* ("abrupt changes in the form of misgovernment"), with references to my personal reminiscences from life in pre-war Bulgaria. Pre- or post-*Anschluss* Vienna became *verboten* territory in my speeches. By focusing on Bulgaria, I was unlikely to encounter cognoscenti in my rural audiences. At the same time I was eliminating potential questions about Viennese experiences that I wished to bury rather than resurrect. Just as Tarkio bragged about its basketball team, I boasted about the amazing quality of the Sofia Opera, the fact that Bulgaria was the source of most of the world's attar of roses, and that all male students in public schools had to shave their hair. Long hair was hardly the vogue in the early 1940s in rural Missouri. Still my audiences reacted sympathetically when I described the rampantly luxurious hair styles of some of my classmates at the private American college where such draconian preventive measures against hair lice were not required.

As the weeks passed, the collection plates became the chief source of my pocket money. Instead of waiting on tables or performing other plebeian part-time work, I pontificated to ladies' auxiliaries, church congregations, and even an eighth-grade commencement ceremony with the self-assurance of a so-far-undetected plagiarist. My talks followed the church services which I always attended because a member of the congregation was usually my host and source of transportation. I found that the small format of the *Reader's Digest* discreetly fit within the covers of all bibles or hymn books. While others lustily sang Christian hymns, I devoured what at that time passed for au courant literature and clever humor. The virtuous camouflage of the *Reader's Digest* provided a sinful seasoning that certainly improved its otherwise rather bland contents. But there was a more subtle reason for my reading secular literature, while the rest prayed and sang: unconsciously, I was flaunting my agnostic Jewishness among the *goyim*.

One Sunday I answered the call of the First Methodist Church of Shenandoah, Iowa. Over four decades later, as I look at the scene through my double lens of nostalgia and dimming memory, I can still see the collection plate attached

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to a long handle move slowly in my direction; with a little effort I can still capture the tinny sound of dimes hitting other dimes or nickels. The fingers in my pocket were already clutching my usual five-cent offering when a daring thought occurred to me: why not deposit a fifty-cent piece? After all, it would be back in my needy pocket within a couple of hours at the latest. Perhaps it might shame other parishioners into more generous contributions. It's probably my imagination when I now remember that the majestic bong of my half-dollar piece crashing onto the puny pile of small coins startled the neighbor on my right into contributing a quarter. Mentally, I made a note to carry henceforth a half-dollar coin to all my future speaking engagements. To this day, I have the definite impression that on that Sunday in Shenandoah, Iowa my talk about Bulgaria was particularly polished, my accent unusually mysterious, my anecdotes only faintly schmaltzy. I felt that my prospective honorarium, suitably weighed down by huge half-dollar coins and possibly even blanketed by an unprecedented dollar bill, merited that extra effort.

When the Reverend J. Richard Sneed shook my hand, I felt a particularly firm grasp. His voice seemed almost tremulous as he thanked me. His hope that I should return in the not too distant future appeared to emanate straight from his heart. With one hand on my shoulder, he walked me toward the waiting car of the farmer who had offered to drive me back to Tarkio. Only as he removed his hand and gave me an ever so subtle shove toward the vehicle did the infamy of the First Methodist Church of Shenandoah descend on me: I'd paid the outrageous sum of fifty cents—scandalous in those days of nickel Cokes and subway tokens—to listen to myself talk.

"Dear Mrs. Roosevelt," I wanted to write, "warn the President not to trust the Methodists."

My Very First Divorce

In 1953 I was teaching at Wayne State University in Detroit while consulting for the pharmaceutical firm Syntex, of Mexi-

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co City. On one of my many flights between those places, as I was engrossed in the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, the shadow of a passing passenger momentarily darkened my page. I glanced up to catch the fleeting image of my first wife making her way down the center aisle to the lounge at the back of the DC-6. She was talking to a dark-haired man. Although I hadn't seen her in over three years, I knew that she had married a Mexican and might still be living somewhere south of the border. I waited, with some effort, to surprise her until we landed. Finally, as the line of passengers pushed by me, I rose to face her at eye level, to catch the first expression as her gaze fell unprepared upon her first husband. Somehow I thought that such a naked glance would tell me how she felt about me after three years. She couldn't have been more than three feet away when she noticed my look. She stopped, puzzled, but said nothing. "Virginia . . . " I started. Something seemed out of focus: it wasn't her. I mumbled, "I'm sorry," but didn't go on to say, "I thought you were my former wife."

If you asked most of my current friends, they'd say I had been married twice; in fact, Virginia was my first of three wives. I married her before I reached the age of twenty. "I see," you might nod understandingly, but you wouldn't see. I married, not because my bride was pregnant, but because I thought I was old enough to do so, even though—or especially because—I was still a virgin. I had already graduated from college (where I had met my future wife on a blind date) and had worked for a year as a research chemist at CIBA, a large pharmaceutical company in New Jersey. On my way to start a doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, I stopped in Dayton for the wedding at my twenty-four-year-old bride's home. Our bridal night was spent on the train in a Pullman compartment—a locale quite in keeping with fantasies I'd had as a teenager traveling between Vienna and Sofia on my annual summer visits to my father.

Six years later, still childless, my wife and I moved to Mexico City, where I had accepted a position with Syntex as associate director of chemical research. Today Syntex is located in Palo Alto, California (next door to Stanford University where I teach now) and has sales exceeding a billion dollars. In 1949

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it was a minuscule, unknown concern—located in the scientific wilderness which supposedly extended from the Rio Grande all the way to Patagonia—that was trying to break the logjam in the production of cortisone, at that time an exceedingly expensive drug. In the event, our research team made history: we beat the American and European competition in accomplishing the first synthesis of cortisone from a vegetable source (a Mexican yam, colloquially called *barbasco*). Our group actually made it to the front page of the *New York Times* and into a big picture in *Life*. Even more important, on October 15, 1951—two weeks before my twenty-eighth birthday—we achieved the synthesis of the first steroid oral contraceptive.

Early in 1950, I asked Virginia for a divorce to marry the woman who was pregnant with my first child. My wife could have been nasty or at least recalcitrant, but she was neither. Since there was no argument about money—apart from my salary we didn't own much—we decided to retain one lawyer for both of us and to get the quickest Mexican divorce possible. We drove to Cuernavaca (where Mexican residents could be divorced in one day) and our *déjeuner à trois* was so civil that our *licenciado* asked whether we were really certain about a divorce; he had never encountered a more *simpatico* couple who were about to get unmarried. But two hours later I was an ex-husband, and within weeks, a first-time father with a new wife. Soon thereafter, Virginia also married someone in Mexico and promptly became a mother. My relief on hearing that news, of course, was partly attributable to dilution of residual guilt about my extramarital affair; now, I felt, our respective family portraits were being drawn on similar canvases.

When I was asked to fill out a biographical inquiry for *Who's Who in America* or some such compendium, I listed my second spouse in response to the question, "Name of Wife." "Date of Marriage," I left blank. These were not lies, but once I'd denied the existence of my first wife in print, it wasn't easy to resurrect her, even for those close to me. Should I have announced, as soon as my two children were old enough to understand, "By the way, I've been married once before"? It seemed too cavalier, in the absence of a good reason, to

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bring up the topic, which their mother and I never discussed. During one of our wedding anniversaries, when my nine-year-old daughter asked, "Papa, when were you and Mom married?" I fudged and moved the date a year backward.

Although it took me years to see the parallel, my own parents divorced when I was six years old and kept the fact from me until I was nearly fourteen. People to whom I tell this are usually shocked. How come I didn't notice? And, more to the point of my own history, why did my parents keep it a secret?

Invariably, I spent my summers in Sofia, where my father practiced medicine. The rest of the year, I lived in Vienna in my grandmother's home with my mother, who had met my father when they both attended medical school at the University of Vienna. The fact that they didn't live together seemed perfectly plausible at that time. My mother never really learned Bulgarian, disliked living in Sofia, and, not surprisingly, had found it difficult to establish a practice there. Besides, to any sophisticated Viennese, Sofia was the backwater of Europe and no place for the education of an only son. When I was old enough to enter school, my mother and I moved back to Vienna. I saw a good deal of my father when he visited us during holidays, or during the summers when I traveled to Sofia on the glamorous Orient Express. I always had an enjoyable time with my Bulgarian cousins, uncles, and aunts. Ladino, the language they used among themselves, was *lingua incognita* to me, but I spoke some Bulgarian, and many of them knew German. I suppose I was simply too young and generally too happy to wonder that my parents didn't cohabit.

My father's specialty was venereal diseases. In those days, before penicillin, syphilitic patients had to be treated with arsenicals for several years and were reluctant to be seen in my father's waiting rooms. Scheduling appointments so that paths wouldn't cross was always a problem. I hardly ever met any patients, even though my father's office and living quarters were in the same apartment house. One day, however, I encountered a handsome woman reading on the sofa, who wasn't embarrassed. She greeted me by name. The following Sunday, she joined my father and me on our weekly hike to the Vitosha Mountain, at whose foot Sofia was located. When

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we got home that evening, my father—whom I recognized even then as a dashingly confident, and eloquent man—became tongue-tied. At last, he stammered that my mother and he had been divorced, that they had kept it from me "for your sake," but that the time had come for me to understand why there was a woman friend—"not a patient," he hastened to add. To his apparent surprise, the revelation of my parents' divorce made no particular impression on me. I had just fallen in love for the first time and was wondering when and where I'd get my first kiss. Somehow, the fact that my father also had a girlfriend just made everything more intriguing.

Years later, when my own daughter had reached about the same age, she walked into my study after dinner and sat on my desk. A contented look on her face, she mentioned that one of her classmates, already living with a third father, had complimented her that morning in school on the evident stability of our domestic life. On the spur of the moment, I decided to bite the bullet. "Actually, I've been married once before," I announced in an offhandish sort of way, as if I had just remembered that fact, and quickly went on, "but not your mother. It's her only marriage."

Like my father, I ended up surprised. "Papa, you too?" she exclaimed, breaking into giggles rather than being shocked. "Tell me more." It didn't take long for my daughter to get the whole story: her name, the circumstances of our meeting, what she looked like, and the absurdly young age at which I married. I even had to produce the group of pictures from my former connubial life that I'd so carefully guarded from everyone among my chemical files. After studying them, she asked, "How long were you married?"

"Six years," I replied. Then I asked, "How should we tell this to your brother? How about you telling him?"

My daughter looked at me, distantly, saying nothing. I was about to repeat my request, when she stopped me. "Six years? But I was born . . . "

When I had finally confessed it all—I, a synthesizer of the first oral contraceptive—she broke into a whoop. "Wait till I tell Dale," she exclaimed, and ran out to look for her brother. My father is now ninety-five, but I have never told him about that episode. Perhaps he'll read it one day.

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More than a quarter of a century since the day I thought I had seen Virginia on a plane to Mexico City, and years after telling my children about her, I still had not acknowledged her existence to anyone else in my second married life. Then one day, after my second divorce, I received out of the blue a letter from her, sent from her home in the Midwest. She had seen me on a television program and, in spite of my silver hair and the partial mask of a beard, recognized me immediately. She wondered if we could meet again, since she was about to visit California on a vacation. I blushed to myself, wondering whether I would recognize her, considering how poorly I had done just three years after our divorce.

One's imaginings about long-delayed disclosures usually prove to be exaggerated. I recognized Virginia right away. The bare outlines of our separate lives we told each other in just a few hours. Yet how does one reconstitute a quarter century of absence? She could not know, nor I tell, how I had denied the existence of our marriage—all six years of it. A Stalin of the emotions, I had erased from public record a segment of our joint history. If she guessed, she was discreet about it, as she had been discreet during so much of our married life.

After her return to her home, I received a thank-you note together with a gift. The cover of the box indicated that it was an electric yogurt maker. Of course I wrote thanking her, but it was the last thing I needed. Modern laboratory chemist that I am, I make my yogurt the old-fashioned, large-scale Bulgarian way: I bring the milk to a boil, let it cool until I can dip my finger in it without discomfort, stir in a couple of spoonfuls of yogurt, and keep the mixture overnight in a wide-mouthed thermos. I stored Virginia's gift, unpacked, for several months. I had nearly forgotten it when I had occasion to move the box. When I heard some rattles I thought it had probably broken and that it served me right for being so thoughtless. Only when I ripped open the box did I discover that the gift consisted of thirty daffodil bulbs—one for each of the years since our divorce.

According to the accompanying note, they had been dug up in Virginia's own garden and were intended for my ranch house in northern California. I planted them within the week and the following spring, all thirty came out in bloom.

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JUDITH HEMSCHEMEYER

What I Want

Dark Dreams

Dark dreams, dark dreams:

we were condemned to die,
both he and I,
for something we had done.

A jug hung from the gibbet,
a glazed green milky belly of a jug.

He was to be first

so they put me in a toilet cubicle to wait
and I squatted on the Moorish tile floor

staring at the blue and yellow whorls
of endless, interlocking tendrils.

I didn't want to die,
but neither did I want to live
after what we had done.

Then came his hoarse voice
pleading with the hangman,
and I knew the real part had begun.

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Dream After Mother Died

For some reason I needed the snout
of a family dog, yellow and white.
So with a razor I cut across its face,
just beneath the eyes. But the snout didn't fall off.
I'd have to saw it off, I realized.
By now the dog was suffering;
there was a trail of blood across its face.

I asked you if you'd help me kill it
but your sapphire irises disappeared,
sucked into the pupils of your eyes
and I saw that of all of us,
you, the only boy, loved the old dog most.

How Mother laughed that morning when you,
bundled up in your snowsuit, ready to go,
caught a glimpse down her nightie and said,
in that dry way you had,
"Really Mother, those nipples! and those breasts!"

That kind of love.
And remember the cub-scout ashtray you made?
A coaster with a snapshot of your wistful face
staring up? "As if I could bring myself," she said,
"to put out a cigarette in my son's eyes."

And when she tried to leap from the car,
you, her iron boy scout grown six feet tall,
were the only one strong enough
to grab her by the wrists
and, bone to bone at last,
hold her here on the earth with us.
That kind of love.

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First Night

Goddess of the corner of my kitchen,
laughing, drinking my gin, blocking me,
dark eyes gently mocking my apron, me,
you knew my body wanted you before I did.
Floating out to call the kids I tripped,
almost knocked over the beehive, rushed back in,
amazed that such a tiny separation
hurt so much.
Now I know that it would be
three years before we finally touched,
that I would write to you offering myself
and find out you were "married" to someone else,
that I would leave home and force you to take me in,
sleep on the floor like a mascot, waiting my turn . . .

Imagine, at supper that evening,
I thought you were flirting with *him*.

To the Actress Who Taught Me to Read

Even though I was trying to cut you out
of the heart of the one we both prized,
you sat me down on that Salvation Army couch
and taught me your trade—enunciation, poise:
"Why mumble? Your poems are great! Shout
if you have to. Get those pronouns straight. Who's
doing what to whom? They only get one shot
at something you have lived and memorized."
I was halfway to New Hampshire on a bus
before I understood the pleading look
behind the words: She's all I have. Find
someone else. Burn her letters. Leave us.
Write poems to her but give me the warm book
of her body, her heart's blurred, hasty lines.

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What I Want

Not haste,

not like a young drake stiff with lust
treading its mother in the weeds,

but languor
in full sunlight

and wearing that priceless Javanese robe

it took a year to knot,
a year to unknot,
and a day to dye.

"Write about This," You Said

About this?
About us?

Oh, love,
once from a balcony in Greece
I saw two boats suspended in the sky,

the sea,

but blue mist had dissolved the line
between the sea below, the sky above
their shining world.

Then one of them,
almost imperceptibly,
began to move.

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The Quarrel

3 a.m., *Woman in a Cage*
with Deborah Kerr.
Slumped on the spite couch in a rage,

I'm there.

Her cage is a private lift installed
because she broke her hip.
Her son (whom she is smothering)
has left for the weekend—see—
and the cage shorts out and stalls.

As for me . . .

Then vandals appear,
ransack the house and of course
they have to kill her

—all she's seen—

but she becomes a wily bitch
and, using her diamond ring,
unscrews two metal strips
and stabs the leader in the eyes
when he approaches her.

I'm getting hooked. It's instant Oedipus!

Meanwhile her son
(who's threatened suicide)
calls and she crawls to the phone
in her chiffon gown
across miles of parquet

—she rebroke her hip
when she jumped from the lift, okay?—

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and as she grapples with the blinded beast
she inhales with her dying breath
that she's no better than the rest.

Come watch with me.

From the *National Geographic*

The foal had been recently slaughtered, but its skin, hung on a nearby shrub, kept the mare flowing.

So no matter what you say,
no matter how strictly you forbid me
to see you, or call you

"except in an emergency,"

you can't stop me from trying
to make sense of what happened

—the dagger long distance,
the swift skinning of our love—

you can't keep me from nuzzling this shrub.

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JOAN WICKERSHAM

Commuter Marriage

On the platform at Penn Station, at 6:30 on a Saturday morning, a young woman in a red sweater stood waiting for the Boston train to pull in. She was small and slim, with short light hair pulled back into a stubby ponytail. Two shiny pieces had slipped out to frame her face, which looked quite young, schoolgirlish, although she was twenty-seven. The childish look was heightened by the fact that she was wearing bright red lipstick and smoking a short smelly cigarette, and doing neither with much authority. On her bony forearm was an enormous man's watch on a black rubber strap; every few seconds she shook her arm until the watch flopped down around her wrist, and she frowned at it, with a crease down the center of her freckled forehead.

The train came in a little late, and very slowly, as though aware of its own charisma—a faraway circle of light moving in, growing bigger, pulsing a little in the dark air of the tunnel, and then behind it a lumbering line of coaches, big, gray, dusty, hooked together like elephants in the circus. She knew that they were full of people, but it was still a surprise when the train gave a sigh and the passengers started coming out: sudden clutter and commotion all over that still platform. I am a woman meeting her husband at a train, she thought, and it made her feel important, glamorous, like someone in a forties movie. She looked into the faces of the men surging across the floor past her. How would I feel if he were my husband? Or he? And then she saw Jack, and tried to think for one objective moment: and what about this one? But he was pressing his arms around her and bringing his face down against hers. "Ow," she said after a minute. "Your suitcase."

He let go of her instantly and stepped backwards with the suitcase which had been pressing into her legs; then he looked down at it, frowning slightly, as though it were a child he had called into his study to scold, but now he had it there he

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couldn't remember what it had done wrong or figure out how to punish it.

They checked the suitcase, leaving it in a dented metal locker. "Why can't we just go back to the apartment?" Jack said, his mouth against her ear.

She shrugged; he still seemed a little strange and foreign, his hair a different length from when she had seen him last: someone she had just met at a train. "Ed and Caterina are there."

"Toss 'em out," suggested Jack.

"We can't do that. It's their apartment. I thought we'd spend the day doing New York things, and then go home. They're going out to dinner tonight, Caterina said."

"That's tactful of them."

"Don't be so grouchy."

"How about if we check into a hotel for the day? Does that count as a 'New York thing?'"

She hesitated, then kissed him quickly and bent to lift the suitcase and heave it into the locker.

The sight of Maisie as always, even after five years together, turned him shy. She was so pleasing to look at, so neat. When she got out of bed in the morning, the bed was made. Her small body, naked, was surprisingly voluptuous, yet neat: small brownish nipples centered on round breasts, a golden isosceles triangle suspended between small shining hips. Her clothes, folded in the drawer at home, were deceptively inanimate, like sleeping faces—stacks of black jeans, flat-folded sweaters and T-shirts in all colors, aqua, fuschia, lime, black. Then she put them on and they belonged to her, she inhabited them.

Marrying Maisie had surprised him, like having a strange cat come to sleep in his lap: the mystery of being singled out. Dreaming his way through graduate school, he had met her at a party one spring and walked her home, up the stairs, into a bare cool apartment where they sat on the floor and talked until morning. He could not remember leaving; his life with Maisie stretched back to that dawn, a continuum, a filibuster: if one of them stopped talking, the whole thing would be over. Maisie seemed like a detour from the fate that really belonged to him, dull, safe; he felt as though he had mistakenly got on the wrong

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bus, to a much more thrilling destination; his sense of honor prodded him to tell the driver, but he knew that if he told, he'd be put off.

They had lived together before they were married, but not much after. When they met, Jack was in the middle of a Ph.D. in German literature. They lived in each other's apartments and then consolidated into one place, in a noisy student-filled apartment building on the Fenway in Boston. All night long the building shook with the bass notes of a hundred stereos. They had to put their clothes bureau in the living room; their bed completely filled the tiny bedroom. Maisie worked as a secretary in the Harvard natural history museum; she hadn't figured out yet what she wanted to do. She cooked dinners for friends and dragged Jack dancing every couple of months. On Sundays they went for long walks and drank wine by the river and ended up at a foreign movie. Then Jack's father died and left him a french fry factory up in Maine. That sobered them both, a bucket of cold water. Jack had to go, for a while at least, to untangle the threads of the business and find someone else to run it or buy it. Of course I'm coming, said Maisie. I'll be the boss's wife, and I'll give gracious dinner parties that will intimidate the hell out of your employees. They got married and moved north, to a little cottage in a wintry deserted beach community. Two rooms upstairs and two rooms downstairs, and a fireplace that didn't work.

Something was wrong with the heat in that house. No matter how high they turned the thermostat, the rooms were still icy; at night the sheets were stiff and painful. One morning the pipes froze. Jack, swearing, put on his coat and brought in shovelfuls of snow, filling the bathtub with it, so that when it melted they would have water. Three days later the snow was still there, frozen, in the tub. Night after night Maisie sat on the couch wrapped in a blanket, watching television. She watched comedies and westerns and late-night reruns and the news, impassively. Her mother came to visit from Virginia for a few days and said she thought the house could be charming, if only Maisie would do something with it. Why didn't they take the car over to Calico Corners and pick out some nicer curtain fabric, and maybe make some cushions for the living room? Maisie

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shook her head; this question seemed to her unanswerable. Her mother and Jack looked at each other, worried; good, thought Maisie, good.

So when she said she wanted to try working in publishing, and that the only place to do that was New York, Jack was actually relieved. It was the first time she'd wanted to do anything since they'd moved to Maine. Caterina and Ed said they'd love to have her. ("Are you kidding?" said Caterina over the phone. "A built-in babysitter!") Maisie had read articles about husbands and wives pursuing careers in separate states, with enormous phone bills, hopping on and off planes. She saw herself arriving back in New York after a few days in Maine with Jack: a long tanned leg (they had spent the weekend sailing) thrusting out of a taxicab, followed by a briefcase bulging with manuscripts, and glowing Maisie saying "Keep the change" and tossing her hair back and running up the stairs two at a time to her top-floor brownstone apartment. When Jack came down she would let her answering service take all the calls, while she and Jack lay in bed before an enormous atelier window. Then she would get up naked and call in for her messages, impatiently writing them down with a silver pencil: call this agent and that agent, and this famous writer is stuck on his book and needs your advice, and can you fly out to California this week to discuss the movie rights for that horrible but phenomenally successful potboiler you pulled out of the slush pile last year?

When they left the station, she took him to her office, which he had not seen in his two previous visits to her in New York. The Saturday darkness and emptiness stripped it of its importance. How could she make him see the bustle of the booklined reception area, the flashing lights on the telephones, the sheets of paper curling out of typewriters and computer printers? On the other hand, the desertion of the place gave Maisie new power; she was free to stroll down the long halls pointing out the offices of editors, walking around conference tables and letting her hand trail along their gleaming surfaces. She stopped to show him the aquarium in her boss's office; he bent obediently to look through the glass at a tower of slow ascending bubbles, rainbow-skinned fish hanging still in greenish

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water. She did not tell him it was part of her job to feed them. Then on to her cubicle, where she had left the desk strewn with urgent-looking clutter: memos, three fat manuscripts, message slips, mailing envelopes stamped "PRIORITY," all put there in excitement the night before, knowing that the next time she saw them Jack would be with her, impressed. But he only glanced at the desktop. He lifted and dropped the cover of a thesaurus that lay on top of her filing cabinet, and looked at the topless walls and said, "It must be kind of distracting, working in here," and she could tell he was thinking, you left me alone up there to come work in a cubicle?

To get to the factory, you drove north, north, north. You smelled it before you saw it, an oily fried smell breathing out of the pines along the road. It was cold where the factory was, always winter, but the building gave off a feverish yellow sweat, and the snow in the parking lot was slippery with grease. When you came away, you smelled of it. Jack's hair was cold and greasy, and his clothes; the first thing he did when he got home was take a shower. He went to the factory every day and sat in his father's old office overlooking a slippery ravine behind the building: graying grasscloth walls, cans of old paper clips and pencil-ends, manila folders, their ends softened and frayed, iron tiered trays with "IN" and "OUT" written on masking tape in his father's handwriting, faded and stuck on too long ago now to come off. A diagram on the wall proclaiming the respective merits of the Maine and Idaho potatoes, and adjudging the Maine superior; hidden in the desk a research report revealing that more consumers preferred Idaho. Under the rickety swivel chair a plastic T-shaped mat designed to protect the carpet; it was too late for the carpet, which was filthy and beaten down, but all day Jack swiveled the chair around on the mat: his island. He was the king in a parliamentary kingdom; there was nothing for him to do. The business ran itself: the potato buyers, truckers, peelers, cutters, oilers, packagers, shippers, and distributors were all in place, doing their jobs. At home in the first few months, he and Maisie had talked brightly about changes that would make the company more profitable and more attractive to a prospective buyer: new cuts, new packaging, new advertising, new incentives to make supermar-

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kets carry the brand. But every day, when he came into the office, the heavy oily air sucked the ideas right out of him; he fell into the chair and swiveled, looking out the window, until it was time to go home. The things on the desk acquired the cachet of heirlooms, things his father had wanted him to have.

They walked around on broad, mica-specked sidewalks. They stopped for brunch at a deli. They went to museums, where Maisie stopped intently in front of everything and Jack circled with his hands in his pockets and his jaw tight, willing the day to move along. They had coffee in a coffee shop, their elbows drooping on the scarred Formica tabletop. Being alone this way, in public, was exhausting; they had things to talk about, and the longer the things went unsaid, the bigger they loomed. The afternoon grew cooler; the sun went behind the buildings; and Fifth Avenue was suddenly, miraculously, navigable, cleared of shoppers and people with cameras. "Can we go to the apartment yet?" said Jack, his feet dragging like a little boy's.

"Not yet," said Maisie, looking at her watch.

"It's not as though I don't know Caterina and Ed, or don't like them," said Jack. "I have no objection to sitting around and talking to them for a while."

"I want to be alone with you," Maisie said, and took him to walk around Tudor City.

Finally she let them get on a subway. There were free seats in the car, but someone had thrown up in one of them, and there was kitty litter sprinkled on top of it and around it. Maisie and Jack stood at the other end, hanging onto metal loops, with Jack's suitcase wedged between them. The trip took an hour. Jack said, "I can't believe you do this every day." Brooklyn, when they got there, was a dark, misty orange sky hanging over squat buildings packed with lamplit windows. "I guess all those kitchens are full of families having Saturday night supper," Jack said. He imagined kids in pajamas, after their baths, and a grandmother reading to them or playing War with them, while the mother scrambled eggs. But Maisie said no, she thought the apartments were full of people taking showers and putting on makeup and getting dressed for dates.

Caterina and Ed's apartment was in a row of brownstones,

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some of which had carved wooden doors with beveled glass panes, and chandeliers inside and glimpses of living rooms painted dark green, with white shutters at the windows and track lighting overhead; and some of which had iron doors with metal grilles on them, and bedsheets over the windows instead of curtains. They lived in a bedsheet building, up two flights on a black iron staircase that hung off a shiny brown wall. Maisie turned keys in a series of locks and at the last minute the door was pulled open by Ed, who had wet hair and a faint mentholated shaving-cream smell. "Caterina's getting dressed," he said, shaking hands with Jack. "How've you been?"

Maisie kept Jack and his suitcase in the kitchen until after Ed and Caterina left, leaving the phone number of the restaurant where they would be. She wanted him to walk through the apartment not as a guest, but as a possessor. Yet following him through it, down the hall to her bedroom, she felt a bit embarrassed, the way she had when her parents came to visit her at college: two worlds, both loved, but best kept apart.

His suitcase lay in the middle of her immaculate floor, filled with a jumble of clothes he hadn't bothered to fold. She thought of him in the little house in Maine last night, bachelor-like, just throwing things in. And now it was as though the pressure of some pent-up desire had burst the suitcase open; socks and shirts had exploded all over the room. The very messiness of it made her nervous. She had a stately plan for this reunion: some wine, dinner in the kitchen with candles and Caterina's linen napkins, a talk over coffee and cigarettes, and then a procession down the dark hall to bed. The sound of Jack splashing in the bathroom, the implacable hiss of the shower, filled her with dread; she felt as though something irreversible had been set in motion, a clock ticking steadily toward an hour. When he came out, red and shiny and scrubbed, she barely looked at him, ducked past him into the steamy bathroom where she wiped off the mirror to look at her pale reflection and tried to remember how much she had missed him. His wet towel, crowding Caterina's on the towl rack, made the bathroom look sloppy; she took it and hung it on the back of the door. When she came out, she realized she had stayed in the bathroom too long; there was Jack, lying naked with the shades down. She wished he would not do that, take off his own

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clothes; it seemed so businesslike. But she could hardly ask him to get dressed again so that she could undress him. She untied her shoes and put them side by side next to the bed, and she lay down beside him.

Afterwards she was relieved: a responsibility discharged, the library books renewed and now you didn't have to worry about them for another two weeks. Relief made her lively; she threw back the covers and kissed him and told him not to move, she'd check on the baby and throw together some dinner. But he came after her anyway, slowly belting himself into his bathrobe. The baby was sleeping on her stomach, her head turned to the side, her mouth sucking softly and her tiny fists curling and uncurling. They stood on either side of her crib, looking down at her and then at each other, but neither of them said anything.

They had the dinner Maisie had planned: linguine with shrimp and vegetables. A salad. Raspberry sherbet. Jack ate and ate, plowing through what Maisie considered delicate food. She lit a cigarette and thought how this enthusiasm which should have gratified her instead irritated her. Didn't he understand how carefully she chose the tomatoes and zucchini at the farmers' market? How her hands itched after deveining the shrimp? How long it took to julienne everything?

"So," said Jack. "What do you think?"

"What do I think?"

"How's this going?"

"What do you mean?" said Maisie, putting her cigarette out in her plate.

"We said we'd try it for a while, and see how it worked."

"It's only been four months."

"So—"

"I can't exactly leave the job now. I mean, I like it, it's going well, and I've really only just started to learn. If I came back to Maine, we'd be right back where we started."

"I guess we could try living halfway in between. Boston—"

"Now that's crazy," said Maisie, pushing her chair back and carrying plates to the sink. "I'm not going to commute from Boston to New York every day."

"A couple of times a week."

"You'd be the first to tell me we can't afford it. Plane fares—"

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"And what about Caterina and Ed?" said Jack. He was still sitting at the table, twisting to face her as she moved around, putting the food away.

"What about them?"

"You can't stay here forever, you know."

"Who said anything about forever? It's just temporary. Until I can afford my own apartment."

"Your own apartment? But that's so—"

"So what?"

"Definite."

She sighed, squirting dishwashing soap into the sink. Dennis, she thought, yes Dennis, the murder-and-crime editor at her publishing house, he would know how to handle this. They went out for drinks sometimes after work, to a little bar off First Avenue filled with solitary men and women in leather jackets. The tough look of the place at first thrilled Maisie, but nothing ever happened there. No one talked; they just wanted to drink. She and Dennis sat at a tippy little table in the back, Formica made to look like wood, and he told her about his marriage, made so his wife could get out of Russia. His wife was a painter, who slept and drank when she was with him and went away for weeks at a time. It sounded very sophisticated to Maisie, this relationship that swung between politics and passion—after all, the wife didn't have to see him ever, they could have completely separate households, bound legally only until she established residency and could get a divorce. She imagined their home, Dennis' Village apartment, as sunlit and messy, empty glasses and vodka bottles, flattened paint tubes, old photographs of Russians stuck into the dusty mirror frame, a rumpled bed, a half-eaten sandwich. Dennis, she was sure, would not get entangled in the logistics of separate households; he would not go trundling back and forth in a sleeping car; he would not ask her in a timid little-boy voice how long this might go on. He would accept the arrangement grandly, or reject it grandly. But Jack—in these discussions with him she always knew what he should say, but he never said it; and so, although she knew better, she was forced to proceed on what was explicit between them—like a minister who, knowing perfectly well why two people should not be married but receiving no answer to his

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"speak now or forever hold your peace" line, has no choice but to go on with the ceremony.

Caterina was sitting in a white wicker rocking chair, holding the baby on her lap. "Trot trot to Boston," she said to it. "Trot trot to Lynn. Be careful, be careful, Ellie doesn't fall—" and here she opened her eyes very wide, and her mouth, and the baby looked blandly back, and Caterina said "—IN!" and opened her knees so that the baby dipped briefly between them and came up again, looking surprised. Maisie stood at the window, pulling apart a begonia leaf along its veins. It came apart very neatly, as though the veins were deliberate perforations, put there by some considerate manufacturer. It had rained twice already that morning, but now the sun had come out, outlining the raindrops on the windowpanes in white. A strange overexcited brightness was in the room. "Doesn't it make you feel weird to know that no matter what you do with the baby today, she won't remember it?" she said.

"I don't think of it that way," said Caterina, hoisting the baby straight up in the air so its baggy yellow pajama-feet dangled. "Because all right, maybe she won't remember this specific moment, but she's got to store up all these good days in her subconscious somewhere. And anyway, you never know when things really start to count."

Maisie dropped the pieces of the leaf she was holding and plucked off another one. "I read in a magazine that kids who are treated badly at an early age remember it."

Caterina gazed into the baby's face. "How could anyone treat that badly?" she said. "Look at those little cheeks. Don't you just want to bite them?"

Maisie looked at the baby. She was its godmother; so far this had produced nothing in her but an uncomfortable sense that she was letting the baby down. She had known Caterina for years; they had lived together in college, and seen each other through exams, lovers, jobs, and weddings; but seeing Caterina with the baby made her want to back away, as though she had come too close to the fire. She wanted to ask Caterina sometimes whether she felt trapped, but she knew what Caterina would say: of course not. Nobody made me have a baby. It was my choice. Everything always seemed so clear to Caterina. Such

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a simplified idea of morality: this was right, and that was wrong. You did right even when it was unpleasant, and you shunned wrong even when you suspected it might be very pleasant indeed. The most infuriating thing was that so far it had all worked: here was Caterina sitting in her pristine blue-and-white living room, so milky, so serene, holding her baby aloft in the sunlight. Much as she loved Caterina, Maisie sometimes longed for the day when the moral system messed up, when Ed had an affair or the baby grew up and did cocaine. Then Caterina would come to her for advice for a change; and Maisie would listen sympathetically and then give the answer which, she was becoming convinced, was the only truly compassionate one possible: *I don't know. It's not fair. Sometimes you do the best you know how, and things go wrong anyway.*

"So how are things with Jack?" Caterina asked, rocking in the chair.

"OK," Maisie said. She didn't want to talk about it, and she hoped Jack and Ed would get back soon with the Sunday papers. She was itching to light a cigarette, but Caterina didn't like people to smoke around the baby.

"Oh, well, it'll be easier when you go home for your vacation," said Caterina. "Then you'll have more time, and more privacy."

"The awful thing is I don't really feel like that's my home," said Maisie, and instantly regretted it. This was what always happened when she let herself be seduced into a conversation with Caterina: she would swear in advance to keep things on a light level, to keep herself under control, and somehow the lid always came up off the box and all her troubles came swarming out. I am Caterina's screwed-up friend, she thought; she could imagine Caterina and Ed lying side by side in bed at night, sighing and whispering to each other that they hoped everything worked out all right for Maisie. But the truth was that she did feel at home here, where she had her own room with an unfolded old sleep sofa that had once stood on Caterina's parents' sunporch. Right now the baby was sleeping in a narrow dressing-room off Caterina and Ed's room, but Maisie knew that the room she occupied was the apartment's real child-room, and eventually she would have to get out so that Ellie

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could get in. "I could always get my own apartment, I guess," she said aloud.

"And have Jack move down here?" Caterina said, wiping the baby's face with the diaper she always had slung over her shoulder.

"I don't know," Maisie hedged. "I don't think I can really ask him to do that."

"Why not?" said Caterina briskly, the words coming out in a rush, as though she had wanted to say them for a long time. "Frankly, I've never understood why he and Maine have to be a package deal. Let him get someone else to run the place, and move down here."

"I can't," Maisie said again.

"Why not? If he cares about the marriage, he should put you first."

"Yes," said Maisie, pulling off another leaf, "but what if I ask him to move down here, and it doesn't work out?"

Caterina was silent, rocking with the baby, who had begun to whimper. If she starts nursing now, I'll scream, Maisie thought, but Caterina just kept rocking. After a moment Maisie went ahead and lit a cigarette anyway, because her hands were shaking and she knew that Caterina would not rebuke her now; and she thought again how much she hated Caterina when she was unfolding her problems before her this way, like describing the symptoms of some embarrassing infection to the doctor in detail because you know it is your only chance of proper diagnosis and cure. But Caterina couldn't cure anything; she could only anesthetize. Maisie remembered the day before her wedding, driving all over Boston with Caterina, saying, "I don't want to get married." And Caterina soothing, "It's all right, everybody feels like that right before, I felt like that, don't worry." And she had let those words coax her to the altar, like a cat coaxed down from a tree. Caterina knew something about love and safety that she, Maisie, didn't know; but she would let Caterina's words guide her there.

In the dark, in bed, something was waiting to happen. Come on, come on, it said to Maisie, and she knew she ought to ignore it, but there was this immense silence that needed to be filled with something immense, so childishly she put her small hand

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into its big one and let it pull her along. "You don't love me," she began in a soft voice, as though testing a microphone.

"What?" said Jack, not so much as if he hadn't heard right but as if he wanted to give her a chance to change her mind: are you sure you want to say this?

"You treat me like a chum."

"Oh, come on."

"Yes," she said, her voice shaking now and gaining volume. "I feel like we're hiking up the mountain single-file, wearing lederhosen and *whistling*."

He had the sense not to laugh, or perhaps he was too alarmed to be amused. He pulled himself up on his elbow. "That's not how you feel when we're in bed together."

"Oh, yes it is. That's how you make me feel."

The words lay in the darkness between them, out there with no way to get them back, like a letter dropped into the mail chute. Maisie wished them unsaid, but there was a strange exhilarating sense of having set something going. She had never known before that making trouble could be a palpable physical sensation, like splashing in a still pond or bicycling downhill. I'm making trouble, she thought, and there was a reckless creative urge to make more. She pushed off the covers and got out of bed. Jack's discarded shirt was the first garment she came to, and she pulled it on and went to stand by the window. This discussion seemed to her historic, but it had not happened yet; she felt that she should speak carefully, for posterity, but there was also an itch to get on with it already, like standing backstage before a play and watching the audience trickle in, so slowly, so casually. She said: "You don't love me in a sexy way."

"Of course I do. All weekend I've wanted—"

"That's not what I mean. Your wants are so *healthy*. It's like wanting to exercise, or wanting to eat. It comes from the same part of you that likes to read, or see friends, or pet the cat."

"Maisie, what do you want?"

"I want it to be *dark*," she said. "I want it to be involuntary, to come out of *need*, not affection. I feel like we're so damned *affectionate* all the time. Why can't you ever get angry at me?"

"Keep talking this way and I'll get there."

"You see? You see? You're so rational all the time. You're so

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good-humored. Don't you know I'm saying horrible things to you? Don't you know we're in trouble? Why don't you stop me?"

But he stayed propped on his elbow looking at her, as though she were a messenger riding wildly ahead of a cyclone, and he was torn between believing her warnings and looking at the blue sky and the safe, quiet countryside all around them.

Jack did not have to catch a train back until Monday afternoon, but Maisie had to work. She had a meeting at lunch time, she said, so she could not see him then, and she felt terrible about it. She really did seem to feel terrible; she put her arms around his neck and cried, and said she was sorry that things had not gone well. "It's just that we didn't have enough *time*," she sobbed. Jack said it was all right, they couldn't expect things to be perfect every time they saw each other. "But don't let this one become indelible, OK?" said Maisie. "Because we won't see each other for a while, so please just don't think about this too much—" He promised that he wouldn't, and that he would call her the following night after work.

After she left, he went into the kitchen, where Caterina was ironing. She clearly had been taken into Maisie's confidence, and was trying to pretend she didn't know anything was wrong; she blushed, and offered him tea, and questioned him gently about his work, and then, when he complained about the factory, said suddenly, sharply, "So why don't you sell it?"

He went into the bedroom and packed his suitcase, told Caterina he was going to spend the day in New York, and thanked her for having him. "Don't be silly," she said, kissing him on the cheek, "Maisie's part of the family."

The lockers in the station were full, so he left the bag in a checkroom and went out walking. In his head as he walked, he had a conversation with Maisie. I don't own you, he said. I want you to be happy. If it makes you happy to be in New York, then that's what I want.

And she said, If you don't love me enough to do something about it, then why should I give up everything to come live with you in that terrible lonely place?

All right then, I do miss you. Get back here now.

And she said, You don't own me.

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When he was tired he went back to the station to get his suitcase, but rummaging in his pockets he couldn't come up with the claim check. "Sorry," said the clerk. "I can't let you have it without the token."

"But I can see it," said Jack, leaning over the counter and pointing. "It's that green leather one right over there."

"Sorry."

"Wait. What am I supposed to do?"

"After thirty days it goes over to lost and found. You can claim it there."

"That's stupid. Why should I wait thirty days when I'm here, now."

They wouldn't give it back to him. So he sat on a bench fingering his return ticket and waiting for them to call the next train. As he sat there, he began to get an idea. What if he got a taxi and went over to Brooklyn and knocked on the door just like that, and said I'm staying? But he could hear voices on the other side of the door, talking and laughing and interrupting each other, stopped suddenly by his knock; and there he was, standing in the doorway, gazing in on the startled faces of his wife and the people she lived with.

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MARK PERLBERG

The Floating World

for Anna

1

Sounds of koto and flute spool from the radio
this January morning.
Thirty years ago we were in Japan.

2

Fuji's snow-cone flushed in early light
soared above the gate at the edge of the garden,
as though we'd borrowed the holy mountain—
visible from a hundred miles away
only in clearest air of winter—for the morning.
When we rose my shirt was so cold you thawed
it at the stove. I left the house,
turned a corner
and the mountain disappeared.

3

Blowing curtains in the wine shops.
Fire in the waxed paper lanterns
red as blood.

4

Returned to our room in the 300-year-old inn,
its walls, sliding doors brown as oak leaves.

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In the light of the floor lamp, our futon spread
to receive us was the color of moss in noon sunlight.
Rain brushed the city, dripped
from the evergreens, the stone lantern
in our private garden.

5

You sang lieder with our student-guide in Kyoto
eight years after Hiroshima.
Temples, a palace, a walled sand garden.
Back home, I failed to answer his letter.

6

These scenes from the beginning of our story
shine like slides on a white wall.
I reach for them, give them the permanence
of thin lines of ink on ruled paper.
They can matter only to you and me.

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RENNIE McQUILKIN

Riding the Tire

The world's a bog. Has been
for days. A good many things have died,
but don't think I'm among them.

As surely as there's life
in the greys and greens on the soggy wholewheat,
I'm alive. But it wasn't my idea.

What passes for light
is decay.
The radio, at least, still works,

brings news
of disasters in foreign parts
and once, a steady high-pitched whine

followed by a tornado
warning for Berkshire and Hampshire Counties.
Never my own. All afternoon

I have watched the loud blue-blacks go rumbling
across the north, and seen their distant
firing. I do not think they'll fire on me.

In such conditions
thoughts proliferate like cultures
in a petri dish. Nothing's what it is—

my exit from the softening house
is more like an absence of any refusal
to exit.

In any case I'm out.
It's grisly in the east all right, neither raining

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nor not. But westward the willows

are glistening, all those flashy little leaves
like swallows banking
on the sun.

Even the balding tire dangling from the maple
is bright, every last statistic showing.
From its dirty trough a black-eyed Susan shines.

I can do
no less. I suit myself, climb in, am rounded out.
Higher and higher I ride the tire.

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RUTH FAINLIGHT

That Presence

Like a painter stepping backward from the easel,
straightening up from the worktable
with a loaded brush, to see exactly where
another touch of red is wanted, like
a carpet weaver wondering if the time
has come to change the pattern, a sculptor
hesitating before the first decisive cut,
I ponder a poem, repeating every word,
trying to hear where a note needs altering,
testing by breath and sense and luck,

like staring at the surface of a mirror
through soundless levels between glass and silver
into the pupils of that reflected presence
over my shoulder advancing from its depths.

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BETH McGRATH

Uncle John

When I was small he would throw me into the air and
swing me down in strong arms. I remember looking
down into his face and laughing, seeing my party dress
reflected in his glasses and the small scar

that ran from his lip like a cat's whisker.
When I was ten he took me to Ireland with my aunt
and four cousins. In Dublin, Mary Ellen told me
how babies were made. I did not believe her.

He died in his sleep when he was forty-seven.
I imagined my aunt waking beside him, trying to rouse him,
realizing he was dead. I thought of it packing
for the funeral, waiting at the airport, flying home.

At the wake, my cousins' grieving is more than pain
of loss. It is guilt for hate now dissipated, harsh words
not taken back. I ask my mother what happened,
"there are things it's better not to know . . ."

My cousins' tears satisfy our oblivious old aunts;
I wonder what it is that can't be said.
I stare at thick flowers, run my fingers against
the fuzzy wallpaper, wait in line to pay my respects.

The scar on his lip is still the same. His hands,
crossed and resting, are tied with a rosary, bound
with gems in a false position of rest and prayer,
hands which had lifted me into the air.

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JOSEPH HUTCHISON

The Trembling

Great are those hours when the trembling
stills in the hand, and the hand moves with easy
swiftness over the page, or with easy slowness
over the radiant body of a woman.

The rest of the time, it's better
not to lift a full cup of coffee
above important papers. Better not
to shave with a bright straight razor,
or stand on a ladder picking high apples.

It's better to work hard on solid ground—
digging, planting, weeding, sleeping.
Then the trembling enters the earth
like water, and the worms wiggle out
to escape the odd and uneasy vibration.

When I think how our trembling
will be squeezed out of us,
and what short work the worms
will make of our fine stillness,
I feel thankful.

Thankful for trembling, and for hours
of great calm when a ripeness comes unlike death,
and leaves us basking in the easeful radiance
of human bodies and human words.

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JEFFREY HARRISON

Early Frost and Late Snow

1

It was the first night you could see your breath.
Caught coatless by the sudden cold, we four
hurried past a row of townhouses
until we noticed it: a garden of ice.
Someone had left the sprinkler on too long,
and rhododendron, pachysandra, ivy,
and juniper were frozen in a glaze.
We froze too, stared in amazement, until
our minds mirrored that glassy architecture.
We stared as if at an hallucination
that if we blinked would melt away, like tears.
Then someone said, "It can't be good for them"—
the spell was shattered and we hurried on.

2

We stood in the window, watching it come down
in clumps as big as crumpled Kleenexes.
We called it beautiful, that final snow—
how thickly it collected on the trees,
making their branches luminous in the dark—
beautiful, though we were tired of winter,
of kicking through the city's dirty slush.
Still, we never expected what we found
the next day: whole trees lying in the streets,
lawns littered with shattered limbs—just when
the phloem and xylem had begun to flow.
The snow itself had disappeared completely,
like napalm. Spring was in the air again.

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

WHEN I PICKED UP THE FIRST of these two biographies of important American musicians, I was already making the assumption that the combination would shed light on what it means to be a musical artist in the New World in the twentieth century. It does—though not as much light as I had hoped. The two books do other things of value: They paint portraits in broad strokes of two men with a taste and a gift for leading others, possessed of enough talent to compel admiration and even adoration, and driven by enough ambition to consume most lesser mortals. They serve to remind us too that a wealth of music produced by the two is worth hearing and rehearing.

Beyond that, they both do something the value of which is questionable: These are biographies à la mode, rushing to judgment on the lives and careers of two of our contemporaries—one dead just a decade and a half, and the other still living—with a voyeur's myopia. Joan Peyser's volume[1] is the worse offender, so egregiously bad at times as to make bookburning seem respectable. James Lincoln Collier's[2] sinks to this level only infrequently, but even with his altogether more temperate manner you can often wish that he had let a little more dust settle.

Don't get me wrong: Both authors passionately admire their subjects, and make a show of impartiality. And a strong argument for biography of recently dead or still living subjects is the necessity of collecting the data from witnesses while they themselves are still around. But it is rare that the reader feels that Peyser in particular has earned the right to indulge in her almost obsessive "explanations" of Leonard Bernstein's character and the shape of his career.

As I have suggested, Collier's book is by far the better of the two, well researched and organized (unless you are averse to a pretty linear chronological approach), and clearly though plainly written. (It is also a handsome piece of design and manufacture; Peyser's is ugly.) It is rich in telling and amusing anecdote, and often brings vividly to life such now all but forgotten American scenes as late-nineteenth-century "elevated" black society in Washington, D.C., and Harlem before the Depression and the mob. It makes frequent

[1]BERNSTEIN: A Biography, by *Joan Peyser*. Beech Tree Books, William Morrow. $22.95.

[2]DUKE ELLINGTON, by *James Lincoln Collier*. Oxford University Press. $19.95.

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and effective use of the words of those who knew and worked with Duke, drawing upon the oral history repositories at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, the Duke Ellington Oral History Project at Yale University, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, as well as many printed materials. Collier is also good at parsing a piece of music, describing its progress in terms just technical enough to satisfy the musically trained reader but not so technical as to put off the unlettered.

It has become a habit, nurtured by received opinion about such creatures of musical legend as Beethoven, Verdi and Toscanini, to look upon musical careers as a steady climb along a basically ascending path to a final exaltation. Collier's view of Ellington's career could hardly be more different, and not because he takes Ellington less seriously than "classical" musicians: "If we believe, as I do, that jazz is the most significant musical form of the twentieth century, it is obvious that the music ascribed to Duke Ellington constitutes one of the major bodies of music from that era."

Collier's view of Ellington rests on two assertions: that he was not really a "composer" at all in the sense that we call Beethoven and Verdi, or even Cole Porter, composers, and that, at the point in the early forties when, swayed by the opinions of critics, entrepreneurs, and onlookers, he began to think of himself as a composer, he began to betray his own very considerable musical talents.

Ellington was born in 1899 into a Washington family that was not educated but was reaching toward gentility. It was not in those potent sources of what we call black music—the gospel songs of the formerly slaveholding South, the ragtime of St. Louis and the Mississippi Delta, the jazz of New Orleans and the blues of Chicago—that Duke received his initiation, but rather in ways more familiar to the white middle class of the time. Though he no doubt heard spirituals and work songs, it was within the sanitized confines of decorous choral societies, and as a boy he was given piano lessons like any other dutiful son of the middle class.

He was soon to break away to immerse himself, as a member of the Washingtonians dance band, in the cruder strains and more explicit rhythms of the "race music" his parents and their set disdained as worthless, immoral and vulgar. Yet throughout his life, Collier asserts, he was always a bit aloof from it, no matter his later protestations that he was consciously a "Negro musician." "Paradoxically, because of his Victorian upbringing and his need to maintain an aristocratic pose, Duke's own public posture was closer to that of the whites in his audience than to that of the supposedly less inhibited blacks who represented the intellectual ideal of the day."

Furthermore, Collier sets out to show that Ellington's early musical training was patchy and unsystematic. Though he eventually attained a good command of the keyboard and by inspired trial and error came to master his own band and to play upon it like an in-

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strument, he never overcame the limitations of the autodidact. Collier's thesis is that his background made him particularly susceptible to the "art" bug when misguided forces around him infected him with it, while at the same time his lack of rigorous formal training ill prepared him to understand "art" music. "I think that the works of Ellington that matter are those hundreds of pieces in the three-minute form of which he was the master: 'Black and Tan Fantasy,' 'Daybreak Express,' 'Concerto for Cootie,' 'Ko-Ko,' 'Main Stem,' 'Rockin' in Rhythm'. . . . It is my belief that his growing interest in the extended pieces was one of the great artistic errors in jazz history. . . ."

Collier's narrative of Ellington's rise and fall revolves around two dates. The first was December 4, 1927, when the Ellington band opened at the Cotton Club in New York City, the initial step of several that would carry Ellington's celebrity across the country and eventually around the world. Over the next few years Duke assembled his instrument—his first great band, built around the trumpeter Cootie Williams, the saxophonists Johnny Hodges and Harry Carney, the clarinetist Barney Bigard, the trombonists "Tricky Sam" Nanton and Juan Tizol, and the drummer Sonny Greer. He also forged his way of creating material: experimenting with tunes and chord progressions at the piano and with his players, taking a melodic fragment or an entire line from one or another of them, trying out harmonies and countermelodies on their instruments, factoring in improvisation opportunities for them, and gradually creating a whole from these oddly assorted parts. Thus much of the best known work generally credited to him, including "Black and Tan Fantasy," "Mood Indigo," "Sophisticated Lady," and "Don't Get Around Much Anymore," was really a collaboration: Hodges, Bigard, Tizol, Williams, the saxophonist Otto Hardwick and the arranger Billy Strayhorn among others either participated in a significant way or actually (they claimed) wrote the material.

Alec Wilder, the songwriting historian of American popular song, did not consider Ellington a songwriter at all, because so many of his songs began as instrumentals and only later had words grafted onto them. Collier goes further: "We are entitled to question not just whether Ellington was America's greatest composer but whether he was a composer at all." The trombonist Lawrence Brown once put it bluntly, angering Ellington by declaring, "You are a compiler." But, Collier insists, whether or not he was a composer in the literal sense, none of the large quantity of superb and memorable music associated with Ellington would exist without him.

Whatever we might label him now, in the early thirties, his fame spreading by means of radio broadcasts from the Cotton Club and the even newer phenomenon of recordings, Ellington began to think of himself as an artist. The change was perhaps inspired by zealous American critics—some of them "classical"—who found his

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recordings mesmerizing and pointed out what they thought was the influence of Debussy, Ravel and Delius upon him—composers Collier doubts he knew anything about. The change was hastened by a trip abroad during which English jazz writers, led by the composer and polemicist Constant Lambert, hailed him as a genius. Late in the thirties he began to talk often about extended compositions that would mirror the history of his people.

The second fateful date came a few years later, in Collier's view: January 23, 1943, when Ellington's band played the concert suite "Black, Brown and Beige" from the stage of Carnegie Hall. Though it was not greeted with much enthusiasm by either public or critics, its reception was apparently good enough to reinforce Ellington's determination to put together longer and more complex pieces, and after 1943 such extended works were his "major interest," Collier says. He made frequent appearances at Carnegie Hall to introduce these new works, which eventually culminated in the series of "Sacred Concerts" late in his life.

Collier makes a good case for his view, but it does lead to some imbalance in the book. He devotes fully 200 pages to the two decades between 1924 and 1944, from which sprang Ellington's finest music, he feels, and barely 50 to the remaining years—about 30 of them. Some outstanding musicians who played with the band in the latter years, among them Clark Terry, Russell Procope and Sam Woodyard, get short shrift in comparison with their counterparts in the early bands. And Collier hurries by some wonderful later music: To take a single example, the fine and inventive "Add-on on Nippon," recorded in Europe in 1961, is more than ten minutes long—that is, longer than some symphonic movements by Mozart and Haydn—and contains a full measure of typical Ellington virtues, at the same time that it hangs together as a unified whole.

There is plenty of opinion to counter Collier's assessment that Ellington faltered when he exceeded the three-minute blues-based form he grew to maturity with. These partisans of Ellington's later scores admire such pieces as "The Far East Suite" (so does Collier, tepidly) and the movie score "Anatomy of a Murder." Currently it is not easy to judge for oneself: Little of the later music is available on recordings. But that may change: Record companies are caught up in a frenzy of reissues on compact disc, perhaps in order to capitalize on what is in their vaults before the next tide of technological fashion, recordable digital audio tape, washes up on these shores from Japan. For instance, RCA has just remastered a set of three CDs called "Black, Brown and Beige" for its Bluebird label, containing the excerpts from the Carnegie Hall suite recorded in 1944 and much else of great value from the years 1944–46. And historical archives such as the Smithsonian Institution are adding to the available store: The Smithsonian Collection has just released the delicious surviving recordings from Ellington's 1941 revue *Jump for Joy*

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on a long-playing disc (mono only—no remastering for artificial stereo was done). It is inevitable that the later music will eventually be reached.

I doubt that Collier is "right" about Ellington, because I don't believe it is possible for a critic to be "right" in such matters. Critics shouldn't tell composers how to compose, or what to compose; composers have enough to contend with in making those decisions, confronted as they are by personal circumstance and the constraints of tradition and culture. At the historical moment when Ellington made his decisions the American musical mind (and public) was beset by a peculiar ambivalence: a predisposition to think and react in ways that stemmed from European notions of high art and conscious artistic identity, and a fascination with the sounds that stemmed from musical wellsprings of African and Latin origin (though tamed and shaped by European disciplines)—a cultural force not yet detached and self-perpetuating like European art, but still an inseparable part of the social milieu that gave it life.

Ellington shared this ambivalence; he was a child of his time—and of ours, for this ambivalence persists in spite of changes in American attitudes and awareness. One of its chief effects, as described by Collier, will be all too familiar to contemporary observers: "It is one of the curiosities of twentieth-century America that art does not have to be very good to establish its creator as a person of distinction. It is only necessary that it be art. The country is awash with painters, composers, novelists and poets whose work few people find interesting and which is not well reviewed, but who nonetheless have a significant reputation as people of importance."

Leonard Bernstein is also a child of his time; his musical ambivalence—veering between symphonies, jazz and Broadway shows—is a well-known story. Ms. Peyser gives us the particulars of the extraordinary span from the Tanglewood association with Serge Koussevitzky and the substitute appearance as conductor of the New York Philharmonic that thrust him into the limelight, through the televised lectures for "Omnibus" and the successes of *Wonderful Town* and *West Side Story*, to the most recent manifestation of the public man, as a celebrated international all-around musician and cultural cynosure.

But, unlike Duke Ellington, who zealously shielded his private life from sight—Collier reveals little of it—Bernstein's, whether through inadvertency or design, has always been a large part of what his public has known about him. Peyser has interviewed almost everyone who has ever spent more than half an hour with Bernstein and shrinks from divulging nothing her tape recorder has overheard. The overabundant detail in her biography stretches from instances of arrogance and rudeness with others, both familiar and unfamiliar to him, to intimate particulars about his erotic life, both heterosexual and homosexual. Though it is principally the latter kind Pey-

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ser dishes up, for her informants were apparently more numerous and more candid here, she does supply a substantial account of Bernstein's anguished relationship with his wife, the late Felicia Montealegre. We learn that he could be peremptory even with colleagues (Dmitri Mitropoulos, David Diamond, Jennie Tourel) he respected, and that he once went for a period he estimated as three years without saying a word to his son Alexander.

The author does offer a lot of data that reflects well on her subject, too—his affection for and assistance to the members of the Israel Philharmonic, his generosity to impecunious unfashionable composers such as Stefan Wolpe, and his personal loyalties to staff and friends. But she also indulges in an exercise in two-bit psychologizing that grows increasingly irritating as the book wears on. Over and over she hauls out what she feels is Bernstein's unresolved oedipal conflict with his father to explain everything from his callousness and ingratitude toward his mentors—Koussevitzky, Mitropoulos, Aaron Copland, even poor old Wystan Hugh Auden—to the content of his opera librettos. This incapacity for leaving the facts of a life and a career well enough alone reaches its nadir when she suggests that electing to perform *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, "Poulenc's opera about a man who bears children," while Felicia was pregnant was an indication of his androgynous fantasies at the time.

This is not a musical biography at all: We learn nothing about how Bernstein the conductor prepares a score, how Bernstein the composer works (except that he takes a hand in every aspect of writing a stage piece), or how Bernstein the musical savant views musical history and repertoire. (There is only an inadequate summary of the challenging 1973 Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard.) The book comes down to being a garrulous and secondhand account of the associations, encounters and travels of a famous man who just incidentally is a first-class musician.

Peyser offers a justification for her "method," if you can call it that, but it is an unconvincing one. In typical overheated language she says in her introduction, "There is . . . some temptation to conceal, for . . . there are aspects of Wagner in him, canyons of darkness as well as shafts of brilliant light. The biographer can ignore neither." But the preponderance of the material in her biography opens those "canyons of darkness" without, to extend her metaphor, placing them in the setting of the man's broad intellectual topography. Finally the book's triviality and obviousness, unredeemed even slightly by any individuality of taste or distinction of style, are just tiring.

In what little attention Peyser pays to the compositions, she repeats most of the now commonplace charges against Bernstein: that he lacks originality and is derivative, that he unsuccessfully tries to fuse the American vernacular idiom with that of the European concert hall, that he burdens his works with literary and programmatic

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freight which they are too slender to bear. To begin with, surely the progress of postwar "classical" music from elite gamesmanship to utter dead end has by now discredited the notion of originality as the only authentic mark of the true composer. And it is another cultural quirk of our time that we expect instant masterpieces from our artists.

Bernstein, like Ellington, inherited a set of cultural conditions that militated against the confident manipulation of sanctioned materials and methods for a cohesive and stable audience. Many artists went on pretending that these conditions did not exist. For reasons both personal and historical, Bernstein and Ellington responded to the forces that created these conditions.

Perhaps the results were inevitably variable. Most of the music—composed, compiled and even improvised—that we listen to with pleasure was not created by those who were trying to synthesize cultural opposites but by those who took established and accepted means of expression and imparted something individual to them. Beyond a certain point in each of these two very dissimilar careers, these dissimilar artists both chose to attempt synthesis. It was the road less travelled, and they deserve to be honored for their choice.

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BERT CARDULLO

Divided Passions

White Mischief and *A Handful of Dust* are the latest pieces of garbage-in-the-guise-of-art to float our way from England. I realize that this seems to contradict my remarks in *The Hudson Review* last spring, but it doesn't really: there *is* a British new wave, but these films are not part of it. Along with the earlier *Room with a View*, they have nothing to do with contemporary British life; they don't use the past as a combined distancing-telescoping mechanism on the present; and they don't even have much to say on the past *as past*. These are films in the grand British-museum tradition of Alexander Korda, except that Korda's museum for the aristocracy has turned into its mausoleum. Anglophiles fall for these films every time—the accent, the manner, the lushness, the fakery.

White Mischief is based on James Fox's factual account of the 1941 murder in Kenya of the young, adulterous Earl of Erroll. Apparently, since this is a TRUE STORY, it just had to be filmed: I can't think of any other reason for the film's existence. There *was* a reason to make *White Mischief*—to convey the increasing obsolescence of the wealth and rank of the British aristocracy in both a world at war and a country where aristocratic standards of dress and behavior exist in a vacuum. But this reason, this idea, got lost, if it ever existed in the mind of the director and co-scenarist Michael Radford, in the tale of lust and murder. *A Handful of Dust*, of course, is based on Evelyn Waugh's 1934 novel. But whereas a tension exists in the novel between Waugh's witty depiction of a bankrupt upper class and his sympathetic chronicling of the downfall of a man betrayed by his own commitment to that class's ideal of refinement, trust, and decency, no such tension exists in the director and co-scenarist Charles Sturridge's film. Tony Last comes across here as a bore and a dupe, not as a man dedicated to preserving the manner and manor of his class, and as a result he appears to be more the victim of his own naïveté than of his commitment to an aristocratic ideal and the brutalization of that ideal by his fellow aristocrats. Thus depicted, Tony cannot sustain our interest for two hours of screen time, and Waugh's criticism of Tony's peers becomes dissipated. What is left is indeed a mere "handful of dust"; what is missing, for us as well as for Tony, is the emotion that animates that dust and that is named in the epigraph to Waugh's novel, taken from *The Waste Land*: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust."

A World Apart and the earlier *Cry Freedom*, for their part, are con-

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tributions to a relatively new sub-genre: the anti-apartheid film. However well-made and well-acted such a film may be, it is propaganda, not art, and propaganda, whether I agree or disagree with it, belongs in the political arena, not the artistic one. I thought that Athol Fugard had settled this question some time ago in his best play, *Boesman and Lena* (1969), whose foreground is complex human beings, whose background is apartheid, and whose subject is not where foreground and background meet but how they in fact include each other. The nature of art is complexity, ambiguity, mystery, finally beauty, despite the attempts of recent theorists (I nearly wrote "terrorists") either to prove the contrary or to conflate art with history, sociology, and linguistics. Art exists in part to remind us of the profound mystery we're forever trying to dispel from our lives, and propaganda doesn't create mystery, it creates bloody certainty. The call to end apartheid stands purely on its own merit and, in my view, is nearly demeaned by attempts to fictionalize and prettify it (even when the films are based on true stories, as *Cry Freedom* and *A World Apart* are). So too does art stand on its own merit, our hyper-utilitarian society to the contrary, and it is simply ill-served when it is made to house bald calls to end apartheid: the art becomes muffled, and this, I would maintain, is suppression of another kind.

Speaking of artistic suppression, I don't know why there was so much fuss over Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ* (based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis). Or I do know why, and I'm glad that it's past: now the film can follow its ancestors—among them *King of Kings* (1961) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965)—into the oblivion it richly deserves and into which it would have fallen far more quickly, paradoxically, had the protesters against its blasphemy suppressed themselves. And blasphemous *The Last Temptation of Christ* is, but not because it presents a sexual liaison between Christ and Mary Magdalene. First, this liaison is an hallucination given to Christ on the cross by the Devil, in order to tempt him into forsaking his role as the Messiah; second, the sexual encounter occurs after Christ and Mary Magdalene have *married*. In other words, Christ's last temptation in Scorsese's film isn't sex, but rather marriage and family, which would have made nearly impossible his fulfillment of his mission as the savior of mankind. To emphasize this point, Scorsese has Christ marry both Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, after Mary Magdalene's death, and has him father children by them. (Bigamy was permitted under Mosaic law.) In this Devil-induced hallucination, Christ is no longer the Messiah, but he still finds God in domesticity, in earthly peace and love. The Devil is trying to convince the crucified Christ that he is not the Messiah and that, in thinking he was, he has given up the sacred pleasures of marriage and family.

The Last Temptation is blasphemous, as religion, because for much

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of its first half it portrays Christ as a sinner who rebels against being chosen by God to save mankind. This Christ is a carpenter who goes as far as to make the crosses on which the Romans execute Jews by crucifixion! He calls himself a liar and a hypocrite, and he speaks several times of his crippling fear (for example, "My god is fear; Lucifer is inside me"). Now the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. definitively established Christ as one person whose nature was both fully divine and fully human; but the Epistle to the Hebrews made clear that Christ was fully human except for the fact that he was incapable of committing sin. The sex between Christ and Mary Magdalene in the film isn't sin because it occurs, in his mind (and in discreet long shot!), after marriage to her. (And if Christ was fully human, then he was able to procreate, though he chose to remain celibate.) Scorsese's goal, like Kazantzakis', was to bring us closer to Christ by portraying him as more of a mortal than the Scriptures intended. The "blasphemy" of this idea—and it is this kind of blasphemy, the artistic kind, in which I am most interested—is to assume that mortals cannot feel close to a divinely human Christ. The history of medieval religious drama proves otherwise, as does Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1964).

Unlike *The Last Temptation*, Pasolini's film of the life of Christ from the Annunciation to the Resurrection is faithful to Scripture, using as dialogue only direct quotation from Saint Matthew's Gospel. Pasolini is successful because he relies not on a sinning, initially rebellious Christ to make the Savior more human, but on an amateur (and therefore unknown) actor (Enrique Irazoqui), to make the Savior as human as he needs to be. We accept Irazoqui's humanity and divinity immediately because we've never seen him before and have no reason to believe that he is *not* Christ. In Scorsese's film, the star Willem Dafoe, aided—I should say hindered—by Paul Schrader's script, works so hard at being real, or human, that the effect he achieves is the opposite: he seems even more remote from us, more divine (despite his urban American accent, which he shares with other members of the cast, among them Harvey Keitel as Judas [whose accent crosses over into Brooklynese], and which made me laugh—what *was* Scorsese thinking when he permitted this?). Pasolini brings us close to his Christ by literally bringing us closer to him, through the extreme close-up and through the use of the hand-held camera, which imparts a sense of immediacy and vibrancy to events by placing us in the thick of them. Shot in black and white, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* thus aims at being almost a *cinéma-vérité* documentary of the life of Christ. Pasolini knew that an objective retelling of "the greatest story every told" would speak for itself; sentimentality and didacticism—the staples of most Biblical epics—were unnecessary. What "comment," or (visual) scripting, there is in the film comes in the most natural way: from close-ups in each episode of the carefully chosen faces of non-

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professional actors, who respond to what they see with pain, love, wonder, and incomprehension, much as we do two thousand years after Christ's death.

Scorsese should have trusted the gospels, *the* story, not Kazantzakis' version. He has shown himself capable of such trust in the past: in the excellent *Raging Bull* (1980), he felt no need to embellish the story of the middleweight boxer Jake La Motta's life, to make the film be "about" more than it was. And he had Michael Chapman shoot *Raging Bull* in black and white—a bold but appropriate choice for the story of a man whose actual boxing matches were filmed in black and white and whose violent temperament dominated his domestic as well as his professional life. I wouldn't go so far as to say that Scorsese should have had *The Last Temptation* photographed in black and white, and adopted the *cinéma-vérité* shooting style he sometimes used in *Mean Streets* (1973), but had he done so, he might have worried less about capturing the authentic look of his landscape (Morocco) and the veristic color-scheme of his costumes, and more about recording the human truth of so familiar yet divine a story. (He could have chosen to film one of the other gospels.) Scorsese's camera travels and zooms a lot, and the effect, it seems to me, is the reverse of the one desired: we feel as if we're being transported from afar, through time and space, to observe the life of Christ, whereas we should feel from the start that *we're there*, that we're with him and he's with us, that he's still here as well as there and so are we.

Like Martin Scorsese, Eric Rohmer chose a dubious cinematic style for his latest film, *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* (the literal translation of the French title is *My Girlfriend's Boyfriend*). Rohmer described that style shortly after completing *Claire's Knee* (1970), the fifth of his *Six Moral Tales*, for which it was appropriate, and it hasn't changed in *Boyfriends and Girlfriends*, the sixth and final work in his new series known as *Comedies and Proverbs*:

> I do not like long shots, because I like to place the characters in a setting where they can be identified, and at the same time I like to put them so that they can be identified with the backgrounds. Therefore, if I put them in a long shot you won't see the people, and if I go to a close shot you won't see the decor. Instead of using a long shot, I would rather use a panning shot which describes the milieu to the audience in the same way a long shot would . . . I . . . have the camera move . . . to show where [the characters go] without changing the frame. . . . The camera does not move on its own authority . . . . [I] think that [my] characters are bound to their environment, and that the environment has an effect upon them.[1]

[1] Deac Russell, "Interview with Eric Rohmer," *Cinema* (Los Angeles), Fall 1971.

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The problem with *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* isn't its script, as some critics have argued, but the visual style that must give life to that script, the images that must reinforce the words and in turn be reinforced by them. In the best of the *Moral Tales*—*My Night at Maud's* (1969), *Claire's Knee*, and *Chloe in the Afternoon* (1972)—the main characters, men, are self-absorbed and absorbed in the surfaces of life—primarily, the surfaces of beautiful women; and the environments of these films, kept carefully in view, serve as moral comments on their heroes. Jérôme, for example, says in *Claire's Knee* that for him "looks don't count, only intellect," but the young woman he chooses to pursue and the setting in which he immerses himself (the tediously, nearly oppressively beautiful Lac d'Annecy on the Franco-Swiss border) indicate the opposite. The moral of these delicate little tales is "know thyself," and the frightening implication is that knowing oneself in a modern world where superficial beauty is prized above all else may be undesirable, if not impossible: beneath one's own surface, one may find nothing.

Rohmer has described the style of the *Moral Tales* as (French) neoclassical: a style, that is, of restrained camera technique, distilled emotion, taut construction, and pointed language instead of overt action. Rohmer's style, however, replaces Racine's Catholic Jansenism with Heinrich von Kleist's Kantian subjectivism, which coexisted, paradoxically, with Kleist's own neoclassical impulse and postulated that *character* is destiny and that feeling rather than reason dictates character and determines truth. Surely it was no accident that Rohmer came to film Kleist's novella *The Marquise of O.* (1976) after completing *Chloe in the Afternoon*, the last of the *Moral Tales*. And perhaps just as surely it was no accident that, in attempting to repeat the success of the *Moral Tales* in another series of six films, he would parody himself, in part because his subject in the *Comedies and Proverbs* is not the superficiality of men who do not realize they are in love with surfaces, but the interiority of women who are learning to fall in love with essences. Rohmer would be the Marivaux of cinema in these films, in which he dramatizes the psychology of incipient love, the actions and reactions of his lovers—primarily his heroines—as they respond less to the external intrigue of romance than to the inner promptings of the heart. The drama of such films as *The Perfect Marriage* (1982), *Pauline at the Beach* (1985), and *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* is largely internal and as such belongs closer to the camera and indoors, if not onstage, where we can concentrate on the revelations of language and gesture. Instead, Rohmer places these works mostly outdoors, where the environment takes on a role far in excess of the one it should have.

Rohmer makes a big deal, for instance, out of Cergy-Pontoise, the new satellite city just outside Paris (which we can see far in the background of a number of shots) in which *Boyfriends and Girlfriends*

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takes place, but the setting, finally, has nothing to do with character and (verbal) action. If the bland, even sterile, modernity of Cergy-Pontoise's office buildings, shops, high-rise apartments, and artificial lakes is meant to suggest the vacuousness of its inhabitants' lives, then Rohmer should have dramatized that vacuousness, not the growth of Blanche's love for Fabien and, to a lesser extent, of Léa's for Alexandre (Blanche had initially been smitten by Alexandre, and Léa had more or less been living with Fabien). Rohmer saturates his film with pastel foregrounds and white or glass backgrounds—that is, with surfaces that call attention to themselves as surfaces, not to what's underneath—yet he has Blanche utter such sincere remarks as, "I want him to love me, not what I pretend to be," and gives to Léa the following incisive line: "He demands nothing, but he initiates nothing." On the one hand, Rohmer seems to be suggesting that his characters lead empty bureaucrats' or technicians' lives—Blanche, for example, is a low-level arts administrator for the town, and Léa is in her last year of computer school—and on the other hand he wants, somewhat condescendingly, to show how even in empty lives the game of love can end in triumph. The final shot of *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* epitomizes Rohmer's divided and ultimately pernicious impulse: as Blanche and Fabien embrace in the foreground and the happy Léa and Alexandre depart in the background, the frame freezes, as if to suggest the spiritual paralysis that traps these otherwise loving couples.

The proverb on which *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* rests is "The friends of my friends are my friends," and the comic twist, of course, is that Fabien, originally the boyfriend of Léa, becomes not only Blanche's friend, but *her* boyfriend. Yes, this is a slim bit of action on which to base a film, but again, action per se isn't the focus here: it is superseded by the precise calibration of emotional transitions and the careful shaping of language. If Rohmer can be accused, as were Marivaux and especially his imitators, of betraying the spareness of the neoclassical aesthetic with a profusion of rococo ornamentation, then the ornament in *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* is visual, not verbal as in the case of French drama in the first half of the eighteenth century, and it distracts from and finally contradicts the delicacy of what occurs between and beneath the lines. That delicacy is not particularly well-served by Sophie Renoir (Léa) and François-Eric Gendron (Alexandre), who, unlike the splendid Eric Viellard (Fabien) and the acceptable Emmanuelle Chaulet (Blanche), act as if they are taking action instead of displaying the action that is within them. In films as "quiet" as Rohmer's, putting actors on screen whose mere looks can speak is paramount, and I can't recall any of his films save the *Comedies and Proverbs* in which actors were chosen more for their look, for the sake of facial contrast and harmony, than for the character conveyed by the look.

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I liked Jack Clayton's *Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (based on the novel by Brian Moore) more than most people, despite the fact that it is overlong and burdened by Georges Delerue's sappy score. (He also did the music for Clayton's *The Pumpkin Eater* [1964], and has contributed evocative scores to films by, among others, Truffaut, de Broca, and Resnais.) *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* got far less attention than the gaudy British imports I discussed at the start of this chronicle, and I think that's because it's a much subtler film, without the glamour and exotica that would give it appeal to a wide (but unthinking) audience. Judith Hearne is a middle-aged spinster in the Dublin of the early 1950s, and her passion is threefold: alcohol, religion, and James Madden, a widowed Irish-American who lives at the boardinghouse into which she is moving at the start of the film. Judith barely supports herself by giving piano lessons, and her drinking has cost her several pupils and her place in other, more congenial boardinghouses. When we meet her, she has nearly hit bottom—until she meets Madden, who revives her hope of marriage, of simple companionship, which she hasn't had since the death three years earlier of her Aunt D'Arcy, who took Judith in as a little girl after the death of her parents. Madden thinks that Judith has money, which he wants her to invest in his latest project: an American fast-food restaurant in Dublin; she thinks that he's an ambitious, if common, man who is looking for a good wife. They're both disappointed, and Judith's disappointment leads her deep into drink and religious crisis: the one feeds off the other as well as off her rejection by Madden.

The argument has been made against this film that it is predictable; so is *Oedipus Rex*, I would counter. What's important in *Judith Hearne* is not the predictability of Judith's failure in love, but the effect that this failure has upon her faith, which up to this point has been the foundation of a rather shaky life. And that faith is shaken less by Judith's aborted courtship than by her unsympathetic treatment in the wake of it by other Catholics: priest, nun, landlady (Madden's sister), fellow boarders, fellow citizens of Dublin. In other words, it is the God, or godlessness, in man that fails her and leads her to scream "I hate you!" in a drunken fury to the crucifix atop the altar of her parish church. She hates Jesus, the incarnation of God in man—a Jesus whose picture she has always kept over her bed and to whom she has been a kind of bride for much of her life—because she has not been able to find him, as anticipated, in the men and women who surround her. And when she does find him in her friend Moira, she doesn't know what to do with him: she accepts Moira's Christian charity, but rejects her pity with the words "I never liked you." Moira is too good for Judith, too much like the Christ she jealously reveres ("No one is Christ," she says in the book), and Bernard, the landlady's atheist son, is too evil; in between, Judith encounters indifference, much of it brought on by

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her own alcoholism. Her religion is at once her trap and her salvation. She can't live with it at the same time she lives with people because religion has become her life, her obsession, her private experience and no one else's: she wants to know God's ways, to know why she has been given this cross of a life to bear, so that she can become one with Him as she has never become with any other. She can't live without religion because without it she has nothing but alcohol, and that is never enough. Her passion for both religion and alcohol, combined with advancing age, ensures her isolation from humanity, and that is her tragedy, her passion of another kind.

At the end of Moore's novel, Judith is alone in her room at a convalescent home (Moira and her husband have paid for her stay), doubting her faith yet not doubting it, knowing but not wanting to know: "Were You ever? Is this picture the only You? It is here and You are gone. It is You. No matter what You are, it still is part of me." Peter Nelson's screenplay should have left her in her room, whence there is no escape. Instead, James Madden returns, ready this time to marry Judith if she'll underwrite his business venture—he still believes she's a woman of means. When she insists that she's broke, he penitently gives her his address and says that she can come live with him. Upon leaving the convalescent home for her new place (paid for by a "small annuity" invented by Nelson), Judith tosses the scrap of paper containing Madden's address out the window of her cab, and the camera then tilts ironically toward the heavens. She's sober, she no longer wants or needs a man, and, she has implied in an exchange with a nun, she won't be attending mass on Sunday. A miracle! Aside from its contrivance, this ending is wrong because it shifts attention back to the failed courtship, which is not an agon in itself but the trigger for Judith's religious agon. The novel makes this clear in Judith's long confrontation with Bernard, significant sections of which are missing from the film, and in several of her interior monologues (including the lines quoted at the start of this paragraph), none of which are translated by Nelson into voice-over.

Maggie Smith is Judith Hearne, and she doesn't make a false move, though she, and we, would have been helped by her disembodied voice on the soundtrack, deepening her colors and her crisis. Bob Hoskins is James Madden and at times he seems uncomfortable in the role, as if he hadn't got fully inside the mind and body of this bluff American dreamer; the tacked-on ending doesn't make matters any easier for him. Peter Hannan, who was the cinematographer for *Withnail and I*, shot *Judith Hearne* in color to match the Dublin Judith sees and the Judith we come to know: faded, dreary, sallow in complexion. Jack Clayton, the director, does not work often (seven features in thirty years) because he does not often work well. His best previous film was *Room at the Top* (1958), his

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worst (and I mean worst) *The Great Gatsby* (1974). He's serious but he's also often ponderous, and ponderousness is tolerated least by the film among all art forms. Clayton began as a social realist, and with *Judith Hearne* he returns obliquely to his roots if he does not join the ranks of British new wave directors. For Judith's crisis of faith is the postwar world's as well, with one difference: she can't escape from hers (Peter Nelson's new ending to the contrary) as so many of us do from ours in the various sureties of love and work and play, of career, family, and state. Judith has nothing and no one, and she can do nothing other than be. Booze helps, but it also torments. Like religion. I am moved by her story as I am not by the pathos of accommodated lives.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Avant-Garde Follies

AVANT-GARDE THEATRE DATES BACK to the late nineteenth century, with André Antoine's *Théâtre Libre* in France and its successful imitators elsewhere—the *Freie Bühne* in Germany, the Moscow Art Theatre in Russia, the Independent Theatre in England, the Abbey Players in Ireland, the Provincetown Players in America. These in turn have bred successors, to the point where we now take it for granted that there should be two types of theatre existing simultaneously—a commercial theatre that is inflated, vulgar, expensive, and shallow, contrasted to an artistic theatre that is small, aesthetic, frugal, and profound. Actually, the commercial theatre has had its artistic successes, and the avant-garde has by no means been unerring, but the major theatrical movements of the past hundred years, like naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, dadaism, surrealism, epic theatre, futurism, constructivism, or absurdism, have usually been associated with theatres of the latter type.

Recently, however, avant-garde theatre has been changing drastically. Troupes still operate on a nonprofit basis, but, aided by government and private grants, and a wealthy audience willing to pay high ticket prices, productions are becoming enormously lavish, a Ziegfeld Follies for dilettantes. At the same time, there is a mindlessness about it all, not only in the productions themselves, where everything is subordinated to spectacle, but in public discourse. Contemporary "performance artists" like Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Martha Clarke, and Lee Breuer shun theory; there are no manifestoes as in the past, no controversy, no "ism." (*The Drama Review*, the leading journal of experimental theatre, has even had an official policy forbidding critical appraisal of works being described!) The goal of these directors seems not to be to transform society, but merely to amuse its affluent members—*flagorner*, rather than *épater*, *le bourgeois*.

Breuer's *The Warrior Ant*, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Majestic Theatre last fall, had 85 performers, including singers, actors, puppeteers, dancers, musical ensembles of various types and sizes, and supernumeraries. There were costumes ranging from the West Indies to the United States to the Middle East to Japan to eighteenth-century Europe, plus flashy scenery, some wonderful Japanese Bunraku puppets, and an enormous ant puppet twenty feet high, with six legs manipulated from below by actors with sticks, eyes that lit up, and airplane wings with revolving propellers.

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(The cost of this puppet alone would have paid for the entire properties budget of a more traditional theatre company for a year.) The production ran about three hours, yet was only a portion ("Book I and the conclusion of Book III") of the whole piece, which has been in development since 1984, with workshop performances in Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Denver, and New York. If nothing else, Breuer is an artist at grantsmanship.

The Warrior Ant is a mock epic that tells the life story, from birth to death, of a samurai ant, "a macho romantic." The first act celebrates his conception and birth with a Caribbean carnival, with amplified music so loud that I feared for the foundations of the newly-renovated theatre. In the second act, the ant, depicted as a Japanese Bunraku puppet, has a duel with a stinkbug, and encounters a worm named Maeterlinck (presumably after the playwright, who also wrote books on ants, bees, and termites), who leads him down to Hell, to the sixth circle "where marched the souls whose sin was art." In a final scene, the ant, still depicted as the puppet, climbs a redwood tree and has an encounter with Death. It was all a grandiose foolishness, made bearable by amiable flashes of humor, the excellent puppetry, and the skill of its major performers, some of whom are members of Breuer's Mabou Mines[1] theatre company, a troupe known for the talent of its actors and the rampant anti-intellectualism of its productions.

Puppetry in this country is generally relegated to a minor theatrical form for children, but in Japan, as in some other Oriental cultures, it is a high art. As early as the seventeenth century, Japan's greatest playwright, Chikamatsu, wrote lengthy plays for a doll theatre which are noted for their sensitive characterizations and beautiful language. Construction of Bunraku puppets, three to four feet tall with elegantly detailed features (even fingers and eyebrows are movable) and costumes, is an art form in its own right. Each puppet is manipulated by three handlers in full view of the audience; the handlers undergo arduous training, spending ten years learning to operate the feet, then another ten to master the left arm, before finally progressing to the right arm and head, as principal handler.

The puppets here, under the master handlers Yoshida Tamamatsu and Kanju Kiritake, were a constant delight, especially in the duel with the stinkbug, with lunges and shouts and a little flashing samurai sword. As in traditional Bunraku, dialogue was spoken by visible offstage narrators. In keeping with the wild eclecticism of the piece, these were dressed in red velvet eighteenth-century costumes with white wigs; the two principal narrators, Frederick Neumann and Ruth Maleczech, both Mabou Mines regulars, were superbly

[1]The official explanation for the odd name is that it was taken, in a moment of whimsy, from a mining company in Canada. Maybe so, but *maboul* is French slang for crazy, "nuts," while *mine* is a cognate with the English "mien," i.e., face or expression.

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clear, varied, and understated. Maleczech has astonishing vocal range, even managing a deep baritone for the worm.

Ultimately, however, the small, delicate puppet performances were overwhelmed by the enormous scale of the production, not only because of the vastness of the stage and the auditorium, but because of the inanity of the whole concept. Maeterlinck's books on insects were both factual and metaphorical, a basis for his ruminations on human beings. Breuer's piece told us nothing factual about his insect characters, beyond some naughty remarks about the copulatory practices of flying ants, and had no existential or social resonances whatever. Slick, lavishly funded, and unchallenging, *The Warrior Ant* was like a huge television commercial; it even had Philip Morris as its major sponsor.

The Brooklyn Academy continued its "Next Wave" festival with Robert Wilson's new piece, *The Forest*, based on the *Gilgamesh* epic, updated to the nineteenth century. That is not so outlandish as it sounds; *Gilgamesh* is rooted in the Neolithic Revolution, especially in the story of the wild man of the forest, Enkidu, who is seduced away to the city, where he becomes civilized, but is shunned by the animals with whom he used to live. Wilson seems to find parallels between this and the Industrial Revolution, a continuation of the same process, in which we gain more and more control over nature but become ever more alienated from it.

The Forest does not belabor this theme, however. Weaker performance artists like Breuer seem to work from *ideas*, which are then translated into performance in an often heavy, obvious manner. Wilson, however, works from images in the first place, with results that are thus less obvious, more open. *Gilgamesh* was only a starting point for *The Forest*, a stimulus for a series of tableaux that Wilson then expanded and focused for their own sake, rather than to convey a message or tell a story. Many of these were very striking—an old man, with ghostly white hair and face, intoning German poetry by a seashore; four androgynous figures in severe white costumes performing a stiff, robot-like dance; strange troglodytes in a rocky grotto; a nineteenth-century industrialist sitting at ease in an elegant study alongside a couchant lion, while busy laborers float behind them on sliding ladders in a shadowy factory reminiscent of Lang's *Metropolis*. The major influences were from the visual arts rather than literature, with scenes recalling surrealist paintings, the stage designs of Adolph Appia, or the films of the German expressionists. The simple, repetitive dialogue (like the intoned poetry) was chanted rather than spoken, for a musical or atmospheric effect rather than to convey meaning.

But if Wilson's visual imagination is keen and true, he is a duffer at rhythm and tempo, which are basics in any performing art. The scenes went on far too long, and rarely developed in action or even in mood; a uniform gloom was pervasive, and whenever something

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did happen, like a lean figure in black strutting across the stage, it was always at a dead slow pace. When Enkidu met the seductress, they approached each other from opposite sides of the stage like streams of oozing molasses; by the time they finally got together, the audience, if it was still awake, no longer cared about this supposed primeval coupling. Such scenes are designed more for reproduction as photographs in slick magazines than for actual performance, where four solid hours at the same steady, stolid, stupid pace is like the Chinese water torture.

David Byrne's music for the piece was correspondingly eclectic (drawing on everything from Charpentier to rock) and heavy, with a basic theme that sounded like a well-tempered pile driver. The cast of twenty were German, with all the precision, intensity of focus, and ultimate docility characteristic of German actors. *The Forest* was originally performed at the Berlin Freie Volksbühne, with a subsidy of 3 million marks (about 2 million dollars!) from the West Berlin Senate. Thus do the enlightened Germans support *Kultur*. Philip Morris, again the major corporate sponsor for the American production, kicked in a mere $350,000.

Wilson is undoubtedly talented; working with a genuine playwright, and a director with a sense of timing, he would be a superb scene designer. But collaboration goes totally against the individualist mystique of performance art, where the idiosyncratic creator-genius must conceive and control every aspect of production, and where nothing less than a masterwork will do. A big ego, big concepts, big casts, big scenery, big promotion, and above all big money—for what? I have been using the term "avant-garde" for these productions in a generic sense only; it has lost its functional sense, no longer being "avant" anything, nor a "garde" of anyone. It is simply a type of theatre, one that has become lavish, self-absorbed, and elitist, siphoning off money, talent, and attention that might well be paid elsewhere, especially in this time of retrenchment and confusion. I do not reject "performance art" because it is visually oriented, or nonliterary, or even because it is large in scale. Theatre has many functions, is many things. There have been all sorts of theatrical ideologues who have insisted that theatre must be this, must not be that, whereas its flexibility is its greatest virtue. Nevertheless, theatre, like any other art form, exists ultimately to challenge, to provoke, to bring change. Breuer, Wilson, and their ilk, all middle-class, middle-aged impresarios of the nonprofit era, pose at being daring and advanced, while instead producing luxury goods for a carriage trade.

Like Robert Frost, whom he resembles in many ways, Thornton Wilder has a false reputation as a folksy sentimentalist, when in fact his writing is austere, often grim, when looked at carefully. *Our Town*, that staple of high school and community drama groups, is if

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anything overly somber, but because of his method of loading on very specific details—the home canned string beans, the smell of Mrs. Gibbs's heliotrope, Emily's blue hair ribbon—it is easy to neglect his overriding meaning when reading or performing the play. In fact, Wilder is always looking at the specifics through the wrong end of the telescope; there is no joy in his depiction of them, only an awareness of their smallness and transience. After all, *Our Town* is a play about death, which, as so often in Wilder's works, occurs early and arbitrarily to someone very undeserving of it, in this case in childbirth to a young woman who was the brightest student in her high school class. But when the Stage Manager in the last act says that "the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long. . . . they stay here while the earth part of 'em burns away, burns out; and all that time they slowly get indifferent to what's going on in Grover's Corners," he is describing the detached, Olympian viewpoint of the play itself, in which all the details, from the heliotrope to the hair ribbon to death itself, "grow kind of pale." Wilder combines the vision of Samuel Beckett (a writer he greatly admired) with the images of Norman Rockwell.

The Lincoln Center production of *Our Town*, directed by Gregory Mosher with sets by Douglas Stein, was performed at the Lyceum Theatre; the continuing success of *Anything Goes* at Lincoln Center had the company performing its new season at this long-empty Broadway house. As in the original production, and most productions since, the stage was left bare. Staging *sans décor* is no longer new or daring, of course, but if anything it has grown in effectiveness; too much was made of it in the original production, turning what should be a background, atmospheric element into something obvious and intrusive. Theatrical setting is something you should respond to, rather than marvel at. Here, the huge brick walls of the Lyceum stagehouse, with its mysterious, shadowy alcoves, gave the setting a monumental quality, reminiscent of the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla. The walls were painted gray, while Jane Greenwood's superlative turn-of-the-century costumes were all done in shades of gray or black, with a stark white dress for Emily in her scene at the cemetery. The whole production had the look of an old black and white movie, abstract, distant, strange. It created the perfect austere tone for this play, which never became remotely sentimental; at the most poignant moment, when George at the end flings himself full length at Emily's feet, weeping at her grave, she stared ahead indifferently, almost amused.

Unfortunately, the acting did not do justice to the intelligent directorial concept and superb designs. The mime work was erratic; actors would carefully and elaborately lift imaginary food to their mouths, only to have it apparently evaporate the instant it got past their teeth. Accents varied from small town New England to pure New York City. Penelope Ann Miller looked too old and too big for

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Emily, particularly in the early scenes, yet managed to seem too callow and glib for a supposedly bright, sensitive girl. Eric Stoltz was marginally better as George (the role is smaller and easier than that of Emily), and some of the lesser characters were well played, especially Peter Maloney as Emily's father, but the overall level of acting in the large cast was well below what one should expect from a major theatre company.

The biggest disappointment of the evening was Spalding Gray as the Stage Manager. Gray began his acting in New York with experimental theatre groups in Soho, where he was usually better than the material, and went on to gain attention for a series of lengthy autobiographical monologues, delivered in a mesmerizing, understated manner. In his performance as the Stage Manager, he struck the same deadpan tone as in the monologues, which was a foolish mistake. Of course the Stage Manager should have an air of godlike detachment; he is omnipresent and omniscient in the play (though apparently not omnipotent—he reports, but does not control, events), and never becomes emotionally involved with the plights of the characters. Nonetheless, he does find life on earth fascinating; he is disinterested, but not uninterested. Gray, however, seemed bored by it all. He also lacked authority, which is a quality the character must have if he, as Wilder's spokesman in the play, is to convince us of the validity of his philosophy. In the monologues, Gray was interesting because he seemed like a man floating passively through life, disengaged, neurotic, always responding aesthetically rather than actively to events. A neurotic Stage Manager in *Our Town*, however, is ridiculous. Perhaps it was a result of Gray's theatrical experience; avant-garde theatre is a poor training ground for acting the classics, even a modern one.

A. R. Gurney's *The Cocktail Hour* is a delightful comedy of manners, with wit and charm combined with the serious undercurrents about money and family conflict that characterize the best of the genre. It also contains the metadramatic elements of role playing, literary allusion, and self reference that are common in his plays; he is our only dramatist these days with a concern for the formal elements of drama, which he layers here like a Chinese puzzle.

The play takes place in the mid-1970s, in the living room of a wealthy home in upstate New York. John, the middle-aged son, works in publishing but is also a playwright; he has returned home with the manuscript of a new play that deals with the family, wanting to gain their permission to have it performed. His parents, stuffy WASPs of the sort Gurney satirizes so gently yet so deftly, are appalled; they have been embarrassed enough by his plays in the past, and assume that this one will be some dreadful exposé, though he constantly assures them that it provides a balanced view. The playwright's sister arrives, an animal lover eager to go off to Cleve-

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land to study dog training at some posh institute; she too gets angry about the proposed play, but in her case it is because she is disappointed at the smallness of her part! The parents alternately argue, threaten, cajole, and rage at the son, and even try to buy him off. He, however, has a deeper motive, to work out an understanding of and reconciliation with his parents, who have always seemed distant and neglectful.

The characters are obviously based on Gurney and his own family, but that is not the only way that the play is self conscious. The fact that it is a play about a play leads to unending but graceful interplay between the play proper and the play within it. Like the play itself, the son's play is called *The Cocktail Hour*, and the family's discussion of it occurs, logically enough, during the cocktail hour before dinner. "The cocktail hour is sacred," says the mother, citing a bishop who maintained that it "took the place of evening prayers." The father points out that audiences will confuse the title with that of Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, a complaint that leads to numerous literary allusions, comments about audiences, and grumbling about critics, whose attacks on the son's plays are of course the same as the ones that we critics have made about Gurney's. Thus does the piece constantly shift inside out, from a story that absorbs us to a performance that acknowledges its own existence.

As the first act draws to its close, the father asks the son how the first act of *his* play ends; the son replies that there is a revelation that the older man is not the son's actual father, an unsettling disclosure that provides the basis for more conflict in the second acts of both the inner and the outer play. I shall not reveal the ending, except to say that there is a reconciliation of sorts, and that the father, now also somewhat reconciled to the play his son is writing, suggests that it have a strong ending, "a kicker," which the son dutifully provides, and which works again for both plays.

Keene Curtis was strong and funny as the gruff old father, while Nancy Marchand, with a flat New York State accent and a vague yet patrician manner, was especially wonderful as the mother. Holland Taylor as the sister was convincing as an animal fancier, yet also seemed appropriately elegant and attractive. Bruce Davison was suitably handsome and preppy as the son, but had a tight, rather monotonous voice, and seemed to lack intensity. This problem, however, was at least partly the result of the way the role is written. The sister at one point complains that her brother in writing the play is doing what he has done all his life, going around teasing and irritating the members of his family, but that is not how he seems at all. He is instead always trying to placate the others, and as a result he just seems too nice to be a playwright; the device of his voluntarily asking the parents' permission to have the play performed does not ring true. A writer who exposes his parents either doesn't give a damn how they feel about it, or else consciously wants to hurt

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them; if, on the other hand, this man is so desperate to gain his parents' approval that he is willing to give up his play for them, then his need for love must be far stronger than Gurney depicts it.

The Cocktail Hour is a felicitous play, similar in its technical concerns to those of the British playwrights Tom Stoppard and Alan Ayckbourne, who share Gurney's fascination with metadrama, i.e., drama within drama. What keeps Gurney out of that first rank of authors, however, is the curious lack of passion of his central figures. It is always clear what they want, but they don't seem to want it very much. The son's objectives in *The Cocktail Hour* are clear: he wants to write plays, and he wants to get love, or at least respect, from his father and mother. Yet most of the time in the play he is merely passive, letting the parents or the sister be the driving force, asking the questions and setting the terms of the conflicts. We feel that if his play about the family never gets performed, or if the attempted reconciliation does not come off, he will be sad, but not crushed; he is just an amiable fellow who writes plays and loves his family, rather than someone who is *driven*. Stoppard's and Ayckbourne's heroes, though ordinary folk in most ways, are typically obsessives or compulsives, which gives their plays a manic drive that Gurney's lack. Gurney is a gentle playwright, which keeps him from being a great one—a critical slight that he will probably incorporate into his next play!

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GARY KRIST

Fiction Chronicle

THE PUBLICATION OF RAYMOND CARVER'S new and collected stories[1] would be a major literary event at any time, but it seems especially important right now for two reasons. First, of course, is the fact that Carver died last August, making this his last book of fiction. But perhaps just as significant, the book has appeared at a time when critics are re-evaluating the whole minimalist aesthetic with which Carver was associated from the beginning of his career. There has been, to put it bluntly, an anti-minimalist backlash in the book press over the past few years. Such a backlash was inevitable, I suppose, given the unrelenting flood of fashionably numb fiction that's been appearing for the last half decade. Until recently, these chronicles of disaffection and ennui had somehow captured the hearts of the hipper reviewers and those trend-hungry urbanites who (God love them) are still willing to part with $17.95 for a hardcover book of "contemporary literary fiction." Nowadays, however, we read vitriolic denunciations of minimalists like the so-called "brat pack" (McInerney, Ellis, Janowitz) and their predecessors (Carver, Beattie, Frederick Barthelme) in articles with cute titles like "Less is Less." Minimalism, like many of yesterday's fashions, has apparently become today's object of scorn.

I must admit that I'm as tired as anyone of reading spare, adjective-less accounts of alienated protagonists failing to connect with the world. Many minimalist authors do sound alike, after all; it's a hazard that comes with the territory when everyone's trying to write lean, purely descriptive sentences full of brand names and song titles but devoid of anything like an articulated thought or emotion. But after reading through almost 400 pages of similar stories in Carver's collection, I'm convinced more than ever that the minimalist controversy can't be judged with the thumbs-up/thumbs-down mentality our movie critics seem to adore. This is, quite simply, a very impressive book, one that expresses a coherent, compassionate, and important view of the world. Yes, the book made me angry at times, and there are parts of it that are so mannered—even anesthetized—as to seem almost laughable, but the cumulative effect of Carver's stories is strangely powerful. And to read them sequentially is to watch a major writer evolving before our eyes, growing be-

[1] WHERE I'M CALLING FROM: New and Collected Stories, by *Raymond Carver*. Atlantic Monthly Press. $19.95.

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yond the limitations of his early work. It's almost as if there's an unintentional *Bildungsroman* running along in the subtext of these 37 stories.

Roughly the first half of the book consists of stories from Carver's three early collections: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please*, *Furious Seasons*, and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. There are some excellent stories here—some may even turn out to be classics of the genre—and they introduce the subject matter that Carver remained faithful to throughout his life. His protagonists, most of them male, are typically passive, listless, down-and-out losers living on the economic margins of the Pacific Northwest. They drink too much, have fights with their wives, girlfriends, and mothers about the most trivial things imaginable, and can't seem to hold down a job. Out of this limited material, however, Carver builds something remarkably sturdy. He is a master of that minimalist virtue of finding complex expression in simple surfaces. In "Fat," for instance, a waitress's banal conversation with a voracious, curiously polite fat man somehow evolves, over the course of four or five pages, into an eloquent expression of her own restlessness, fear, and dissatisfaction. Somewhere in all the talk about baked potatoes and vanilla ice cream lies the sorry nub of this woman's life. The story concludes with the waitress suddenly stating: "It is August. My life is going to change. I feel it." In the context of the encounter, her statement comes as a startling revelation, but one that seems inevitable nonetheless.

However, my complaint with these early stories (and with many minimalist stories by other authors) is that they rarely go beyond this sort of static revelation. Carver too often merely presents a situation—usually quite banal on the surface—and then, through the action of the story, uncovers its bleak underpinnings. His characters are so passive that they never dream of acting upon their situation, of changing *anything*; instead, they just have another drink and, more often than not, end up fixating on a seemingly random image or idea—moving to Alaska, say—that we readers are to recognize as an apt comment on their existential condition. In fact, Carver often adopts his characters' passive fixation as his own mode of telling a story—an unnecessarily confining aesthetic technique, and one that ultimately makes the reader of these stories ask that deadliest of all questions in the tenuous game of fiction: "So what?"

But while some of Carver's colleagues steadfastly continue to produce this kind of flat, presentational minimalism, Carver himself eventually moved on. The stories in *Cathedral*—the collection that followed *What We Talk About*—are much more propulsive than the earlier works, and, not coincidentally, much more powerful. The characters are still passive and inarticulate, but their universe has gained a dynamism it lacked before. The seeping of hope into this universe from Carver's personal life may have had something to do

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with this (the tale of his kicking booze and finding a good woman is now legendary in literary circles), but I think the key difference is that, in these later works, Carver has an expanded notion of what a story can *do*. He doesn't merely delineate a situation here; he goes on to transform it in line with its own inner dynamic. The characters don't, like the waitress in "Fat," merely sense that their lives will change. But, by the same token, there are no fake epiphanies here, no easy sentimental conversions (with the possible exception of the husband's in the overrated title story "Cathedral"). Carver just allows his characters to step out of the trap of their limited circumstances, at least for a moment or two. The result is a handful of really extraordinary stories like "Fever," "A Small, Good Thing," "Where I'm Calling From," and "Feathers." This last, for instance, is a funny, oblique account of the effects on a characteristically dissatisfied Carver pair of a rural couple and the bizarre, affirmative existence they have managed to concoct out of the most unlikely elements—a peacock named Joey, an ugly baby, and a new set of false teeth. "Feathers" is a moving, multi-layered story that is, to my mind, a masterpiece.

The volume concludes, however, on a rather mixed note, with seven new stories never before collected in book form. A couple of them—"Whoever Was Using This Bed" and "Menudo"—rise to the standard Carver set for himself in *Cathedral*. Others—"Intimacy," "Elephant," and "Blackbird Pie"—are less compelling. They tend to be longish stories for Carver, and their protagonists seem somewhat more articulate than their predecessors; but these qualities, which should be giving the stories more scope, just make them seem a little flaccid and unfocussed. One wonders what Carver was up to, what new territory these stories were leading toward. We'll never find out, of course. And, as this volume so clearly confirms, our literature will be significantly poorer as a result.

Someone who owes a large debt to Carver (though I'm not sure she would say so) is Bobbie Ann Mason, another good cop on the minimalist beat. Her new short novel *Spence + Lila*[2] is exactly what we've come to expect of the author of *Shiloh and Other Stories*: a simple, straightforward tale of ordinary people in ordinary circumstances, told with extraordinary perception and precision. Like Carver, Mason has a turf, and this book finds her again returning to that area of rural western Kentucky she has already made her own. It's a place where the subtle rhythms of farm life blend seamlessly with the loud shimmying of TV, Burger Kings, and rock-and-roll—an amusingly compromised Arcadia that her characters seem to accept as perfectly natural.

The book begins with Spence and Lila Culpepper, Kentucky farmers passing into old age, driving to a hospital to have a gristly

[2] SPENCE + LILA, by *Bobbie Ann Mason*. Harper & Row. $12.95.

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knot in Lila's breast investigated. The knot, it turns out, is a malignant tumor, and Lila's breast must be removed; later she must undergo another operation—this one more dangerous—in which the blood vessels to her brain are cleaned of plaque. The book focusses on Lila's reflections in the hospital as she examines her past, her relationship to her husband and three children, and the implications of her own death. Her husband, meanwhile, is going through his own quiet crisis, trying to conceive of life without Lila. Along the way, the various Culpeppers must endure the manifold indignities of modern hospital life.

Does all of this sound familiar? It should, since this is well-trodden ground in contemporary fiction. What distinguishes this book from most other cancer tales, however, are Mason's extraordinary sympathy for her characters and her ability to perform that Carver-like magic of investing surface detail with large doses of emotion and significance. Take this wonderful example: Spence and his dog Oscar are out in the barn feeding the five small Holsteins he is raising for beef. Alone because his wife is in the hospital, he has just been thinking of how one must puncture the yolk of an egg with a fork before putting it into the microwave:

> Oscar wags his tail. The calves flick flies with their tails. They amble forward, rubbing each other and gazing at Spence with liquid eyes the texture and size of fried eggs. A horrifying image flashes through his mind—jabbing their eyes with a fork.

What makes this image resonate so deeply is not only the echo of what Spence has just been thinking about microwaving eggs, but also the way in which the image embodies Spence's growing anxiety about the mastectomy his wife is to undergo. This anxiety, like most emotions in minimalist fiction, is never completely articulated, in large part because the character himself is incapable of articulating his own emotions. But it is firmly present in the surface details. This is high art, it seems to me, but art that covers its tracks beautifully.

Having said that, however, I must admit that this book is not entirely satisfying. Mason's painstaking narrative style, while utterly convincing, remains so doggedly at the surface of things that I began to long for a single character—just one—with a full-grown, self-aware consciousness to come along and dive below the hamburger wrappers and tuna casseroles and plastic bowls of Jell-O and come up with something like an insight. Mason, like many talented minimalists, is constantly in danger of biting off less than she can chew. We can only hope that next time she'll take a few more chances and startle us. As it is, she's written a little gem of a novel, but the emphasis is perhaps too heavily on the "little."

No one will ever accuse Stephen Wright of biting off less than he

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can chew. In his second novel, *M31: A Family Romance*,[3] he bites off the entire American dream, chewing it up (and the scenery besides) with some of the densest, most vivid language in recent fiction. It is impossible to talk about this novel, in fact, without talking about that language; Wright's scathing vision of Middle America is constructed of prose so bizarre, overripe, and feverish that it would threaten to overshadow the characters and events themselves were they not equally baroque in conception. "Ozzie and Harriet" this isn't.

The book, however, *is* about families, those "temporary and uneasy alliances of strangers who would hate each other less without the coercion of blood, the spiraling bonds of genetic ivy holding its victims fast to a blasted tree." The family à la Wright is a sick and perverse thing, in which religion has been replaced by *National Enquirer*-style spiritualism and where family affection gives way to incest, cruelty, and a claustrophobic kind of mutual loathing. The heads of Wright's nightmarish family are Dash and Dot, a husband-and-wife team of lecturers on the UFO circuit, who believe themselves to be aliens from the galaxy M31. They are in communication with the homeland through the lunatic gesticulations of their autistic daughter Zoe. Also waiting for the ride home to outer space are the other children: Dallas, a malevolent, oversexed young man with a gun; Maryse, who starves her infant Mignon by feeding her nothing but a diet drink called Weightlesse; Trinity, a somewhat sinister version of "Daddy's little girl"; and Edsel, who watches the radar monitor all day long for signs of the approaching mothership. All of them live together in an abandoned church with a revolving radar dish on the steeple and a carpeted egg-shaped spacecraft ("the Object") in the living room.

OK, you've heard enough to know the book is funny—savagely so, in the manner of great satire. But you've also heard enough to suspect it is overdone. It is. In fact, for every person who is riveted by Wright's prose, there will probably be one who is repelled by it. My reactions wavered between those two poles. I found some moments in this novel stunning, combining comedy, grotesqueness, and deadeye accuracy in a way that few authors are capable of, such as this one in which Edsel and his friend are examining a decomposing body in the basement:

> Donnie poked tentatively at it as though testing for doneness until suddenly the stick plunged with alarming ease deep into the squishy mystery of the thing itself. His hand jerked back as if from an open flame. There was a short bubbling sound, and dark liquid ran out of the hole and was sucked away instantly into the porous ground. Donnie's eyes were big. "Ooooo," he whispered in simple wonderment. "Biology."

[3] M31: A Family Romance, by *Stephen Wright*. Harmony Books. $17.95.

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But in other instances—too frequent to ignore—Wright simply tries too hard: "At his back the wounded sun dragged its stain across the whitewashed sky and out of sight beneath the uncertain flooring of this derelict planet."

The prose aside, Wright's novel, while difficult to read at times, is never less than interesting. The plot is as grim as you might expect: The arrival of strangers leads to the ultimate disintegration of the family. And the book ends—in a whirlwind of evangelistic zeal—with a space-age apotheosis and even a virgin birth of sorts. The whole is an extremely ferocious send-up of the iconography of the New America. It's an ambitious, challenging, and upsetting book. And it marks Stephen Wright as one of our most provocative writers.

Ferocious is also the adjective of choice to describe the work of Rick DeMarinis. DeMarinis has actually been around for some time (he has seven books to his credit), and I had read one or two of his stories in magazines over the years, but nothing prepared me for the cold-eyed brilliance of his latest collection, *The Coming Triumph of the Free World*.[4] These are loose, expansive stories about the madness and mania of American life. And they are utterly unlike anything else I've ever read.

True, some of the trappings of bad eighties minimalism are here—one story even takes place in that temple of New America, the K-Mart—but familiar material becomes quite a different thing in DeMarinis' hands. Like Wright, this man is angry, and his anger emerges as a kind of sour and deadly serious slapstick. In one of the stories, a married man falls in love with the witless, post-adolescent poetess who has driven his son to attempt suicide, and the two of them end up on a date in Disneyland, being blessed by a local lunatic who calls himself the god Cupid. In another, a fat cleaning lady with the nickname "Swift Premium" is impregnated by a six-foot-six black South Sea Islander who collects Mantovani records and is writing a thesis about boredom and the American Housewife.

While the stories may sound merely silly in paraphrase, they gain significance and a real moral weight in the medium of DeMarinis' unstoppable verbal energy. That energy may be unfocussed in some of the stories, but the scattershot approach does no harm to the author's cause. He's writing about the trivializing power of contemporary American life, and about the killing complacency it promotes in us. In one of the stories, a painter (formerly an adviser to the President) remarks: "The business of art is not beauty. The business of art is to butcher whatever coddles the mind." That's as good a definition of art as any I've read, and Rick DeMarinis butchers complacency as well as anybody writing today.

[4] THE COMING TRIUMPH OF THE FREE WORLD, by *Rick DeMarinis*. Viking. $16.95.

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Kermit Moyer does a bit of complacency-butchering himself, though in a much quieter way than DeMarinis. Where DeMarinis is frenetic and sharp, Moyer is calm, contemplative, even nostalgic at times, but no less incisive. The stories in his collection *Tumbling*[5] (two of which first appeared in these pages) cover that familiar ground of first collections—the betrayals, compromises, and assorted revelations involved in growing up sensitive. What lifts these stories above the usual coming-of-age sagas, however, is the marvelous way Moyer's adolescents skate along the edge of taboo as they negotiate their way into the world of adults. Not yet enfranchised in that world, they have the outsider's moral elasticity that can stretch effortlessly to encompass incest, voyeurism, and all sorts of inappropriate desire. As a result, these protagonists manage to undermine the adult world even as they enter into its compromised mysteries.

Voyeurism, in fact, is the primary mode of perception in these stories; Moyer's adolescents are constantly observing their adult betters with the quiet concentration of the truly obsessed. In "Compass of the Heart," a teenager on a family camping trip watches his father and his father's girlfriend making love in their tent. Two incestuous runaways in "Tumbling" violate the privacy of a family offering them temporary shelter. In "Life Jackets," a guilt-ridden boy watches his mother's friend masturbating in a cruise-ship bathroom. And that scary intensity of observation is echoed in Moyer's precise, meticulous prose. He writes beautifully—almost too beautifully at times, when the perfection of his descriptions threatens to overshadow the fertile messiness of the lives he describes. But Moyer's stories succeed in accomplishing what I think is an underappreciated feat in fiction: they reveal the thorny and fecund strangeness beneath seemingly ordinary lives.

Finally, after reading all of these intensely *literary* books this quarter, dipping into *Summer's Lease*[6] by John Mortimer came as something of a relief. Not that this literate, intelligently written novel is in any way even remotely "trashy"; that's probably the last adjective that would spring to anyone's mind to describe it. But it is a book about a summer vacation, and it *feels* like a summer vacation in itself—relaxing, engaging in a satisfying but not terribly demanding way, and exuding a very pleasant aura of exotic climes. It's the sort of thinking person's entertainment that the British seem to pull off much better than we do.

The book chronicles the three-week Tuscan holiday of Molly Pargeter and family of Kensington Park Road. Molly, a middle-aged mother blessed with a certain amount of financial independence and frustrated romanticism, has become intrigued by an advertisement offering to let "La Felicita," an old villa in the part of Italy so

[5] TUMBLING, by *Kermit Moyer*. University of Illinois Press. $11.95.
[6] SUMMER'S LEASE, by *John Mortimer*. Viking. $19.95.

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overrun with British expats as to be known familiarly as "Chiantishire." After a quick reconnaissance trip, she decides to take the picturesque old place, bringing along her less-than-enthusiastic dishrag of a husband and her three somewhat generic daughters. At the last moment, they decide to include (or rather, are blackmailed into including) Molly's incorrigible father, a newspaper columnist and self-styled *bon vivant* who fancies himself a latter-day Max Beerbohm and who provides much of the welcome comic relief throughout the book.

Summarizing the plot is, of course, the surest way of killing the pleasure of a book of this type, so suffice it to say that Molly, upon arrival at La Felicita, finds herself embroiled in a tidy little mystery. She discovers, stuck between the pages of a book from the villa's library, an unsigned "wish list" with several foreboding entries; then the body of a seemingly innocuous Englishman turns up in the bottom of a swimming pool. Meanwhile, Molly becomes more and more obsessed with her strangely elusive landlords, the Ketterings, whom none of the neighbors seems willing to talk about. Eventually, in mild Holmesian form, she deduces the ugly tale that ties all of the strange events together, reveals her discovery to the culprits (but not to the police), and returns to England a much more satisfied woman.

Mortimer has been compared to writers as diverse as Trollope and Nabokov, but in this book he seems closest to the spirit of Wilkie Collins, the nineteenth-century purveyor of overgrown mysteries and detective fiction. Like Collins' *The Moonstone*, *Summer's Lease* is enjoyable more for its atmosphere than its plot. Molly's mystery never becomes quite as compelling to us readers as it apparently does to her, and I must admit that I greeted the somewhat melodramatic climax of the novel with something bordering on impatience. But Mortimer does have something serious to say about the recklessness with which we ignore the consequences of our actions. And the novel is ultimately satisfying (in good old nineteenth-century fashion) because of its rich evocation of setting and character—those balmy Tuscan nights, that decrepit villa with its primitive plumbing and electricity, and those dottily sinister British expats conspiring to eke out their marginal existences in exile. This may not be bare-boned work that explores the disaffected way we live now, but it's fun, not at all frivolous, and it works. One can't, after all, live by literary minimalism alone.

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DEAN FLOWER

Barbaric Yawps and Breathing Lessons

THERE'S NO DOUBT ABOUT IT, Anne Tyler has a gift for barbaric yawp. That's the energy behind her fiction. She does not seem to use a voice of her own, just lets us listen in on her characters' conversations, reveries and internal monologues. Character after character crowds into the action, talking herself into existence. Or himself, except that the males are more often silent types. We have to overhear their thoughts, like Macon's in *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) or Ezra's in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1983). Tyler likes to play off these inarticulate men, who know little about themselves—and want to know less—against women who love to talk, blurt out what they feel, and make things happen. *Breathing Lessons*, Tyler's eleventh novel and one of her funniest, depends greatly on this device.[1] Maggie and Ira Moran have been married for twenty-eight years; she is full of good intentions but meddlesome, pawky, curious, scatterbrained, a charming mixture of shrewd and daffy. Ira tries and fails to be patient with her, not surprisingly, for she is the sort of woman who always penetrates his silences. Typically, Maggie will seize upon the words of a song Ira happens to be whistling (e.g., "Crazy") and accuse him of comments he never thought he made.

Tyler sends her couple on a 90-mile car trip from Baltimore to small town Pennsylvania and back, a journey that takes in (a) a fender-bender, (b) several quarrels, (c) a trial separation lasting about 30 minutes, (d) a funeral staged as a high school reunion, (e) coitus interruptus in the widow's bedroom, (f) another near accident on the road, (g) a detour into the life of an old black man, and (h) another detour into the lives of Fiona, Maggie's ex-daughter-in-law, and her grandson, Leroy. But that is just what happens in the present tense. Much of the story emerges in the lulls when memories take over—the evening Maggie spent on the phone answering a wrong number, for example, or the day she persuaded Fiona not to have an abortion, or the time Ira took his reclusive father and sisters to their first shopping mall. Since all but fifty pages of the novel are from Maggie's point of view, these vivid memories form a colloquial history of her whole marriage. It's a crowded narrative,

[1] BREATHING LESSONS, by *Anne Tyler*. Alfred A. Knopf. $18.95.

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rich in episode and suporting cast, but lacking in the sort of suspense that Tyler achieved in *The Accidental Tourist*, where the indecisive hero was bounced around by two very different sorts of women for more than three hundred pages.

The suspense in *Breathing Lessons* concerns Maggie's notion of "patching up the differences" between her son Jesse, a high-school dropout trying to become a rock star, and Fiona, the pale vulnerable kid Maggie cares more about than her own daughter. Jesse and Fiona were divorced several years before, but that doesn't discourage Maggie. She meddles—when has she ever not done that?—and the results are worse than ineffectual. Tyler's ending provides a sharp antithesis to all the comedy and nostalgia that came before. It's a rebuke to Maggie's sentimentality, to her longing for a happy ending—and perhaps to the reader's as well. It's also proof of a kind that Tyler has a serious vision of life, that her novel will not merely entertain and console. The only trouble is that Tyler *does* want to entertain and console. She has a lot of the Norman Rockwell in her, showing us the niceness of ordinary people, their fallible decencies. In the novel's last lines when Maggie determines to try again, we are invited to see her as heroic—the inveterate maternal do-gooder doomed to fail, probably, but undeterred, a species of comic existentialist. So it's not—unfortunately—such a grim ending after all. Tyler's best novel remains *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, where many points of view tell the story of an unhappy family, and the distances between people are not so easily resolved.

Two other recent novels depend just as much as Tyler's does on recording the colloquial American yawp, but neither one is so gentle or amusing about it. *Story of My Life*,[2] Jay McInerney's third novel, seems to have taken some breathing lessons from J. D. Salinger while *Sunburn Lake*, Tom De Haven's fourth novel, picks up some of its verbal style from Ring Lardner and John Dos Passos. But the two books invite comparison because both writers adopt the voices of modern teen-age girls, with all their stylized slang, anger, racy enthusiasm and desperate insecurity. Both writers want to expose a moral dearth in their worlds, but it's instructive to see how only one of them succeeds.

McInerney's narrator Alison Poole is, like all her friends, a spoiled rich kid dependent on daddy's money, frequent sex, the admiration of her latest guy, the loyalty of a few girl friends, the novelty of drugs. Like her prototype, Holden Caulfield, she is troubled by the adult world's pervasive dishonesty. She knows all about the three "biggest lies" of men, the worst being "I love you." But what really "grosses her out" is some guy "going down on her the first date." She's vaguely studying to be an actress, and sometimes lies skillfully to get what she wants, unaware of contradicting her princi-

[2] STORY OF MY LIFE, by *Jay McInerney*. Atlantic Monthly Press. $16.95.

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ples. Worldly but not wise, she keeps saying after every disappointment and betrayal, "that's the story of my life." Allison's slapdash style races along, amusingly at first ("He goes, I told you, and I'm like, What?"), but that's her only voice. Unlike Holden or Huckleberry, she doesn't see things vividly for us because her language is so limited. There's no unconscious poetry in it, or sharp insight. Gradually you begin to wonder about all the explicit sexuality and raunchy talk, as if it were a male fantasy designed to titillate more than anything else, and you wonder if the author isn't rather too amused by it all. Alison is a sad character, all right; her abuse of sex is pathetic, and she has a dim moral impulse. But her story—it originally appeared as a sketch in *Esquire*—hardly bears the weight McInerney attempts to give it. His epigraph runs, in part: "We may fairly infer that it was not gods, but humans, who first became dissatisfied with the blessings of anarchy."

The three different voices of Tom De Haven's novel are each more expressive—although just as slangy—as the one McInerney adopts.[3] In fact *Sunburn Lake* seems at first to be three separate stories: "Clap Hands! Here Comes Charley (1936)" is spoken by a Lardnerish bachelor, Uncle Charley, who grumbles a lot and gets pushed around; "He's All Mine (1987)" is the monologue of Franny, once a pop singer at the top of the charts, now at forty an embittered landlady trying to relive her past; and "Where We'll Never Grow Old (2028)" is told into a tape recorder by Joy, a fifteen-year-old survivor in a plague-ridden wasteland. De Haven registers each of these voices with detachment and precision, making them all both plausible and moving—no mean feat, considering that he must move from Charley's tough-guy sound of the thirties to Franny's 1987 voice romanticizing the sixties to Joy's hesitant, patched-together improvisations of a hypothetical era forty years from now. Not only believable, these voices transmit the moral anxieties of their times.

De Haven has carefully but unobtrusively interlinked his three narratives. Each of the first two contains an important episode at Sunburn Lake, the New Jersey resort locale that becomes the setting for all of the third story. Each involves an unhappy female singer, whose songs provide an index to the era's dreams and frustrations. In fact, each story title is taken from a song. Each story has its stabbings and shootings, its apprehended criminal, its sexual violence, its unresolved injustices. Names migrate suggestively from one story to the next, the gangster's alias from the first story becoming the name of Franny's first lover in the second, and a prolific songwriter in the second becoming a gypsy tape-dealer in the third. The locked door that Uncle Charley foolishly shoots open in

[3] SUNBURN LAKE, by *Tom De Haven*. Viking. $18.95.

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the first story becomes Franny's apartment door blasted open by a thief ("I mean, what did the guy do, use a bazooka?") in the second.

The novel modulates from an entertaining irony at first (Charley is saddled with a nephew who thrills to the G-men and FBI legends of radio days) to a grim evocation of contemporary lovelessness ("He's all mine," Franny used to sing, but it never was true), and then into the nightmare and atrocity of Joy's story, made all the more horrific by her passive acceptance of things. Each section is richly episodic, amplified and detailed. And when you've finished the novel, it demands a slow re-reading. You begin to appreciate not only its authentic voices but the way De Haven knits his stories together to suggest—without once raising his voice—a critical study of social decay, its causes and effects. De Haven is unflinching. He is now a more serious and disciplined writer than either Tyler or McInerney, and deserves a larger audience.

Louise Erdrich sounds another kind of authentic American yawp.[4] Her first novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), dazzled everybody with its angry energy and inventiveness, and she has gone on with a book of poems, a second novel, and now a third. After the austere poeticism of N. Scott Momaday (*House Made of Dawn*, 1968) and the terse passivity of James Welch (*Winter in the Blood*, 1974), Erdrich brings a refreshing boldness to recent Native American writing. Humor, sex, family scandal, madness, you name it; Erdrich has undoubtedly ventilated the genre. *Tracks* goes back to 1912 to fill in some of the history behind the North Dakota Chippewas she described in *The Beet Queen* (1986) and *Love Medicine*. It has two narrators who pass the story back and forth: old Nanapush, who seems to be setting down a tribal history for his granddaughter, and Pauline, a family outcast who turns into a demon with the partial assistance of an insane Roman Catholic nun. Both speakers are obsessed by a heroically independent woman named Fleur Pillager, who is regarded superstitiously at first for her seemingly god-like strengths, and then seen gradually to diminish and fade into a mere mortal by the end.

The story has some wonderful moments—Fleur outwitting the men at poker, Nanapush trading sexual double-entendres with a feisty old squaw named Margaret, Pauline doing psychic battle with the nun. But it has fewer good moments than Erdrich's other novels. Perhaps she removes it too far from the contemporary world, where the opposed cultures grate so convincingly in every phrase. Sometimes the language of *Tracks* lapses too easily into the mythic, i.e., the anonymous: "I guided the last buffalo hunt [says Nanapush]. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years' growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that

[4] TRACKS, by *Louise Erdrich*. Henry Holt. $18.95.

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would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch. . . ." We have heard such words often in American fiction since James Fenimore Cooper, too often perhaps, and they have been worn thin and parodied by Hollywood scriptwriters. Unfortunately, Erdrich has failed to renovate them here, and such flat spots mar the whole novel. But she's a canny, talented writer, unafraid of the darkest implications of her subject, which I take to be the question of how Indians may survive at all in a blindly oppressive culture. Anyone who doubts her grasp of this subject ought to read her brilliant poem of Indians watching a Western at a drive-in theater. It's called "Dear John Wayne."

Alison Lurie listens to another kind of barbaric yawp altogether, the language of predatory academics, enlightened feminists, complacent male chauvinists, suave psychotherapists, smug art critics, and affluent New York dealers.[5] Her latest novel might be understood as a study of these competing jargons. Polly Alter, recently divorced at thirty-nine, sets out to write the biography of a little-known painter of genius, Lorin Jones, whose obscurity and death resulted (Polly will argue) from brutal abuse by the patriarchal system. Armed with her prejudices and a tape recorder, Polly is deflected and altered by everyone she interviews. Each witness creates a different version of Lorin or Lolly or Lauren or Laurie Jones because each witness is already a distinct individual, with a particular slant on the truth.

Lurie's conception bears some resemblance to Nabokov's in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: the zealous biographer always writes his own autobiography, and must even become his subject's double for a time. Polly learns that lesson deeply, ruefully. Her academic book remains unwritten at the end, but she has re-written her own life profoundly. Seeking the "real" Lorin Jones, she discovers her own repellent selfishness, escapism, and death instinct—as well as, more positively, her own independence. Lurie's treatment is more detached than Nabokov's, however. You never know whether she's being scathingly ironic or just disinterested. Lurie interrupts Polly's personal narrative with eight short chapters of her recorded interviews. In these we hear only voices answering questions: one belongs to a writer who was Lorin's friend at Smith, another is Lorin's former sister-in-law, another is Lorin's husband's closest friend. These "documents in the case" are balanced by Polly's subjective narration, a story of many false starts and erasures. She learns to reject the easy categories of other people's jargon. To her great credit, so does Alison Lurie. Few of her characters can be defined by their jargon or dismissed by a categorical label, notably her sharply individualized lesbian lovers, her several different academic artists, and her surprising ex-hippie poet. Some feminists will un-

[5] THE TRUTH ABOUT LORIN JONES, by *Alison Lurie*. Little, Brown. $18.95.

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doubtedly cringe at the way her story concludes, and some readers will wish Polly had changed more dramatically at the end. But that is as it must be. Lurie's novel is about the irreducible oddity and complexity of persons, something language can only approximate.

William Trevor writes another kind of mystery story, one that will certainly have escaped much notice on this side of the Atlantic, so quiet and subtle are his tactics.[6] He chronicles the Rollestons, an Anglo-Irish family who live on an island estate somewhere along the south coast of Ireland, County Cork. (It is important to know this, since the novel seems to be conventionally English. One should note too that Trevor was born in Cork, but educated in England as well as Dublin.) The novel is cryptic and fragmentary at first, made up of brief inconclusive glimpses. Nothing much seems to happen: young Sarah Pollexfen, a poor relation, is taken in but never quite accepted; she writes lengthy entries about them all in her diary. Tom, the illegitimate child of a servant girl, grows up in painful isolation. He learns that his father, Linchy the butler, was shot during the uprising of 1916. The Rolleston children lead queerly sterile lives. Lionel remains a cipher; John James appears to loathe his mistress, the pathetic Mrs. Moledy; Villana breaks off her apparently idyllic engagement to Sarah's elder brother Hugh; and years later she consents to marry a dry old solicitor she doesn't love.

Some scenes are brilliantly comic, like Villana's wedding where the uninvited Mrs. Moledy gets herself gloriously drunk while the proper guests pretend she's not there. Tom's story is a series of superb understated humiliations and repressions, like the scene where he is forbidden to borrow any more romantic novels for Mrs. Rolleston. Toward the end Trevor quietly pulls each of his threads together. I cannot spoil the surprise, except to say that everything in the novel comes back to evil deeds performed by Rollestons in the pitiless arrogance of their power. Every piece of the puzzle becomes an emblem of that careless tyranny and its costs to both sides. It's almost a miniature *Absalom, Absalom*, but without the rhetoric. Trevor gains his effects by mystification and silences, asking much of his reader. But the effort is amply rewarded. Trevor has now written ten novels and five collections of stories, an achievement of the highest distinction.

Another Irishman under-appreciated in this country is J. F. Powers. He is of course an American, but his ironic stories of Roman Catholic curates and pastors which began appearing in the 1940s, have sometimes seemed closer to Frank O'Connor's or even Joyce's than to anything in the American grain. Put Joyce's "Grace" or O'Connor's Bishop Gallogly stories (e.g., "Achilles Heel" or "Vanity") next to any Powers story, and you will see at once what I mean. His only popular book, *Morte D'Urban* (1963, National Book Award),

[6] THE SILENCE IN THE GARDEN, by *William Trevor*. Viking. $17.95.

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was followed by a disappointing story collection, his third, in 1975. Now I am happy to say he has written the funniest, and most profound book of all, the story of Joe Hackett whose ambition it is to become a true contemplative, not just a pastor but a saint.[7] If he fails in this—and it's not entirely clear that he does—the secular world including the Church and its clergy share richly in the blame.

Joe is the culmination of a lifelong series of Powers characters, from the high-principled young curates like Father Eudex ("The Forks") and the saintly old pastors like Didymus ("Lions, Harts, Leaping Does") to the selfish and sarcastic fathers fresh from seminary, like Father Faber in "A Losing Game" (1955) and the enterprising scapegrace con-men figures like Father Urban. He bears affinities too with Rafferty, the perversely-principled hero of the novel Powers' wife wrote in 1969 (Betty Wahl, *Rafferty and Co.*). What's new about Joe is that he's not just glimpsed in a short story, but given the slow growth and complexity of a novel. Joe came into being in two stories, "Bill" and "Priestly Fellowship" published in *The New Yorker* in the early 1960s. From these one can only conclude that he's perhaps funny and crusty, but essentially a curmudgeon. He doesn't know his new curate's last name and is too stubborn to ask directly. He criticizes his colleagues' priestly small talk, and then feels sorry for himself when he's left out of their company. But this view of Joe turns out to be, in the novel's larger context, quite mistaken.

Powers begins, astonishingly enough, with a Joycean display of technical virtuosity, depicting Joe as a child, a boy, an adolescent, a young man—shifting language and style in each chapter to befit the changing consciousness. For the first time in his work Powers uses explicit sex and a lot of vulgar language, but with such irony and poise as to make one wish for more. Brevity is indeed the soul of Powers' wit. Here is Joe negotiating his first sex with the neighborhood bombshell: "Dora?" "Whut?" "You know what you said." "Whut?" "'Anytime,' you said." Silence. "Dora." "Whut?" "You know." Silence. "Dora." "Cost ya, kid." "O.K." "Ten dollars." "O.K." "I mean twenty." And so on. Powers has refined to a high art this monosyllabic style of talk, its silences more evocative of the tone (here it's funny, sad, tawdry, ironic) than any ampler style could have made it. Wherever Powers uses this terse colloquial style—in telephone exchanges, pastor-to-curate dickering, conversations at the liquor store, Joe talking with himself—he seems to extend its expressive range. These are breathing lessons every writer should study. At one point when Joe and his curate Bill toss a baseball back and forth, Powers makes the *pop* of Bill's weaker pitch in Joe's glove and the *plunk* of Joe's fastball in Bill's glove carry at least half of

[7] WHEAT THAT SPRINGETH GREEN, by *J. F. Powers*. Alfred A. Knopf. $18.95.

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their conversation. Powers has never before been so inventive and verbally resourceful as this.

The novel does again what Powers has always done well—expose hypocrisy, cut down the complacent, ridicule the greedy and pretentious, lament the endless secularizations and corruptions of spiritual life. But his portrait of Joe does more than that. Out of all Joe's lapses and failures, he emerges a good man. He makes the value of human goodness shine forth. Perhaps the word is integrity, perhaps what he achieves is grace. Wheat that springeth green. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. Whatever the nature of Joe's goodness may be, Powers manages triumphantly to make it real. Only a very few writers in any generation manage to do that.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Epistolary Eliot

IN THIS BEAUTIFULLY APPOINTED AND SUPERBLY EDITED first volume of T.S. Eliot's correspondence (there will be four volumes in all), his widow, Valerie Eliot, uses as epigraph to the whole enterprise a passage from a lecture her husband delivered in 1933.[1] The lecture has not survived, but Eliot's brother Henry recorded two sentences which addressed, with TSE's usual originality, the matter of how one should feel about writing letters, or about having one's letters read by others, or about reading letters not written to us:

> The desire to write a letter, to put down what you don't want anybody else to see but the person you are writing to, but which you do not want to be destroyed, but perhaps hope may be preserved for complete strangers to read, is ineradicable. We want to confess ourselves in writing to a few friends, and we do not always want to feel that no one but those friends will ever read what we have written.

So although he might not have been thrilled at the prospect of a complete stranger like myself eavesdropping on a 1915 confession to Pound—"Besides, I am constipated and have a cold on the chest"—Eliot has tactfully allowed us to feel tactful about reading his outgoing mail.

In fact, and although he once wrote his friend Conrad Aiken that "Letters should be indiscretions—otherwise they are simply official bulletins," most of these letters, which extend through 1922 (the year *The Waste Land* was published and Eliot began his editorship of the *Criterion*), are neither indiscreet nor simply "official." The either-or choice laid down to Aiken fails to take into account the number of different ways in which Eliot's prose can be interesting. At least one reviewer of these letters has already found, however, that Eliot's ability to assume different voices depending on whom he is addressing ("He do the police in different voices," as the cancelled allusion to Dickens from *The Waste Land* had it) is a measure of his inauthenticity or fragmentedness as a human being. This seems to me nonsense: why should one write one's mother, one's Harvard professor in Indian philosophy, and Ezra Pound all in the same

[1] THE LETTERS OF T.S. ELIOT: Volume I 1898–1922, ed. by *Valerie Eliot*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $29.95.

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voice? If one demands that a consistent voice permeate a writer's correspondence, one should go to D.H. Lawrence, who tended to harangue everyone he wrote to in the same terms and tone. Eliot is more discreet—even in his indiscretions—and the commendable manners of his epistolary style show in his taking the recipient into account.

For example, a 1914 letter to J.H. Woods, his Harvard philosophy professor, written from Merton College, Oxford, where Eliot is reading Aristotle, is partly an "official bulletin"—since Eliot had promised to keep Woods "au courant" on his studies there—but also something more. He tells Woods he is following three courses of lectures: Harold Joachim's on the *Ethics*, R.G. Collingwood's on the *de Anima*, and J.A. Smith's Logic. He is finding the *Posterior Analytics* "very difficult" and accompanies his study of it "with the commentary of Zabarella, which is remarkably good, and very minute, so that this reading takes most of my time." There follow descriptions of Joachim's good lectures and Collingwood's method with the *de Anima*. Although, from Peter Ackroyd's biography, we knew that Eliot studied Aristotle with Joachim at Oxford, the extent of his immersion in the *maestre de color che sanno* is now more clear. And Eliot's "bulletin" to Woods helps explain the passionate force with which Aristotle is invoked in "The Perfect Critic" (the opening essay in *The Sacred Wood*) where the "living force" of the philosopher is celebrated as well as the "universal intelligence" he applied to everything. Aristotle, says Eliot, wasn't a poet who looked to write critical prose in order to satisfy "impure"—creative—desires:

> In whatever sphere of interest, he looked solely and steadfastly at the object; in his short and broken treatise [the *Poetics*] he provides an eternal example—not of laws, or even of method, for there is no method except to be very intelligent, but of intelligence itself swiftly operating the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition.

This famous definition of "method," in other words, came out of some hard antecedent study.

A month after Eliot wrote Woods on how his Aristotelian studies were progressing, he struck a quite different pose to Conrad Aiken in wondering whether to return to America and take up a career of philosophy at Harvard. He is currently suffering, so he informs Aiken, from "indigestion, constipation, and colds constantly"; the university atmosphere is oppressive; the War is suffocating; and how can one like a country that is "satisfied with such disgusting food?" England is surely uncivilized, but then, on the other hand, there is Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the college bell, and the "people . . . whom one fights against and who absorb one all the same." The young man continues to put himself on stage for Aiken:

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> The great need is to know one's own mind, and I don't know that: whether I want to get married, and have a family, and live in America all my life, and compromise and conceal my opinions and forfeit my independence for the sake of my children's future; or save my money and retire at fifty to a table on the boulevard, regarding the world placidly through the fumes of an apéritif at 5 P.M.—How thin either life seems! And perhaps it is merely dyspepsia speaking.

Dyspepsia perhaps, or perhaps the accents of "Portrait of a Lady," that very artful portrait of a young man who doesn't know his own mind.

In fact, this is one of the last glimpses we are given of the Laforguian or dyspeptic aesthete, conjuring up the world through apéritif fumes. By June of the same year, 1915, Eliot has married Vivienne Haigh-Wood, and a month later is writing his father in quite un-Laforguian terms: "I am *convinced* that she has been the one person for me. She has everything to give that I want, and she gives it. I owe her everything." It is extraordinary to think that this twenty-six-year-old, whose to-be-famous poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," had just the past month been published in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, should without consulting or informing his parents suddenly decide to throw in his lot with Vivien (as she liked to spell it) and England. Eliot appears to have counted on his friends to convince his parents that the life he had chosen was a viable one. Two days after the marriage, Pound—under Eliot's request—sent a long letter to Henry Ware Eliot that was meant to serve as "some sort of apologia for the literary life in general, and for London literary life in particular." It is a fascinating letter, at least as much for what Pound says about himself as about Eliot; although one cannot feel confident that Eliot père was disarmed of his fears and reassured by such claims as "Again if a man is doing the fine thing and the rare thing, London is the only possible place for him to exist." (London was at any rate, as Pound put it in a letter to his own mother, some centuries nearer the "Paradiso Terrestre" than was St. Louis.) A few months after Pound's letter to Henry Ware Eliot, Bertrand Russell wrote Charlotte Eliot in an effort to convince her that, financially and intellectually, it made sense for her son to remain in England: that he could both teach school at High Wycombe *and* pursue the doctoral degree; and that not only was Vivien "thoroughly nice," but her good offices could already be observed insofar as T.S.E. "is no longer attracted by the people who call themselves 'vorticists,' and in that I think her influence is wholly to be applauded." (Eliot's father had remarked, apropos of Pound and Lewis's Vorticist showpiece, BLAST, that he hadn't known there were enough "lunatics" in the world to support such a magazine.)

Five years after the marriage, with *The Sacred Wood* about to ap-

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pear, Eliot wrote his mother a letter filled, among other things, with interesting literary gossip, an item of which concerned the arrival in London of the American "vagrant poet and man of letters" Maxwell Bodenheim. Bodenheim hoped to make a living in London by his pen, and Eliot noted sardonically that, as he had informed the new arrival, "getting recognised in English letters is like breaking open a safe—for an American, and that only about three had ever done it." Of course by this time he had broken open the safe, Pound having already instructed him that while he (Pound) threw rocks through the front windows of English Letters, Eliot was to climb in the back way and "make off with the swag." A year after marrying Vivien, Eliot was up to his ears in reviewing: "Philosophy for the *Monist* and the *International Journal of Ethics*, reviews for the *New Statesman*, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Westminster Gazette* . . ." From the beginning of 1917 to the end of 1919 he produced roughly seventy-five reviews and essays—most significantly in the *Egoist* and *Athenaeum*—among which are to be found some of his most memorable and lasting prose work: essays on *vers libre*, Henry James, Turgenev, Kipling, Henry Adams, Stendhal, Marlowe, Swinburne, *Hamlet*, Ben Jonson, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." (That the bulk of these reviews and essays still remains uncollected is one of the continuing frustrations of contemporary letters: Faber and Mrs. Eliot, please take note!)

At the same time—as is well known, but not till now so grindingly documented—the writer was not only working full-time at Lloyds Bank, but offering courses of lectures to fill out his income. Eliot comes through at his most appealing when he describes to his cousin Eleanor Hinkley (who always provokes him into lively letters) one of these courses, taught in early 1917:

> My greatest pleasure however is my workingmen's class in English Literature on Monday evenings. I have steered them through Browning (who arouses great enthusiasm), Carlyle, Meredith, Arnold, and am now conducting them through Ruskin. There are not many working *men* at present, except one very intelligent grocer who reads Ruskin behind the counter; most of them are (female) elementary schoolteachers, who work very hard with large classes of refractory children all day but come with unabated eagerness to get culture in the evening (stimulated, I hope, by my personal magnetism).

A year later he is in the midst of another series of lectures, "cramming George Eliot for the last two weeks in preparation," and he tells us that for the occasion he has read *Mill on the Floss*, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, and *Adam Bede* (after work hours at Lloyds and after the latest review had been sent off). By this time—the spring of 1918—one feels that the young man of twenty-nine has come into

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his full powers as a critic. The sweep and confidence of his literary judgments, as conveyed in the following sentences, again to Eleanor Hinkley, are all the more impressive for also being true:

> I am very glad you like James. . . . He is a wonderful conscientious artist, one of the very few, and more European than most English or Americans. I think he has about the keenest sense of Situation of any novelist, and his always alert intelligence is a perpetual delight. As a critic of America he is certainly unique. I am reading *R[oderick] Hudson* now in preparation for an article for the James number of the *Little Review*. I am writing on the Hawthorne influence on James, which comes out at the end in an astonishing unfinished book *The Sense of the Past* (read the scenario at the end). *Hudson* I find dull and stilted and old fashioned; but it is a very early one. I think you might like Turgenev. I admire him as much as any novelist, but especially in the *Sportsman's Sketches*. His method looks simple and slight, but he is a consummate master with it. . . . I come more and more to demand that novels should be well written, and perceive more clearly the virtue and defects of the Victorians.

He then proceeds to have at Thackeray, Meredith, Samuel Butler and George Eliot (somehow he missed out on the genius of *Middlemarch*) in invigorating ways. There is some muscle-flexing here, but nothing empty or unfelt in the judgments and comparisons (comparison and analysis, the tools of the critic—as he would put it in *The Sacred Wood*).

His career as a critic coincided, in its beginnings, with the worry that it might be all up with him as a poet; that—as he wrote his brother in September of 1916—"'J.A.P.' [J. Alfred Prufrock] was a swan song." He worried that Vivien would be "bitterly disappointed" if he never equaled it, and confided to Henry that "The present year has been, in some respects, the most awful nightmare of anxiety that the mind of man could conceive"—though, he added, "at least it is not dull." Vivien felt that "Journalism" was bad for her husband, although he loved it: "But I am sure and certain that it will be the *ruin* of his poetry—if it goes on," she wrote to Henry at about the same time. There are a good many of Vivien's letters in this collection, consisting in the main of variations on the theme of her "wretched health" and her overwhelming sense that "life is so feverish and yet so dreary at the same time, and one is always waiting, waiting for something" ("What shall I do now? What shall I do? . . . What shall we do tomorrow? / What shall we ever do?"). The only way, it seems, she could ameliorate her own lot was to worry about her husband's, especially in letters to his mother: "It seems he has not average strength—and added to that he lives as no average man does. The incessant, never ending grind, day and eve-

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ning—and always too much to do, so that he is always behind hand, never up to date—therefore always tormented—and if forced to rest or stop a minute it only torments him the more to feel that inexorable pile of work piling up against him." Vivien knew how to put words together—just pushing through the sentences, written in June 1917, makes one feel exhausted. Eliot by then had begun work at the bank (hours 9:15 to 5:30, with a break for tea at 4). Surely it was not only the experience of living in wartime London that caused him to describe, in July of that year, his sense of himself as "living in one of Dostoyevsky's novels, you see, not in one of Jane Austen's." As for his health, things weren't so bad—"My teeth are falling to pieces, I have to wear spectacles to read, and from time to time I am contorted with rheumatism—otherwise I am pretty well." He would get worse.

The litany of complaints holds more than the occasional bit of something like comic relief. Note the following italicizations of *key words* in one of Vivien's many letters to Tom's mother on the subject of Tom's clothes:

> Tom did *not* get a new suit, *or* new flannels. I am ashamed to say it. His old underwear is still thick and in *fair* condition, but it needs *incessant darning*. Darning alone takes me hours out of the week. He needs a suit, and I think *must* have one. His pyjamas too are all very old and want constant mending.

This was in March, 1917. Eight months later, with winter coming on and Charlotte Eliot having sent money for her son's underclothing, Vivien renders up an account of how that money was spent, in the process of which occurs a sentence-confession it is a delight to misinterpret: "So far the weather has been, and *is*, so unusually warm that neither Tom nor I have made any change in our underclothing since the summer! It is a good thing in a way, but it is *very* damp and enervating at present." Yes, "it" certainly must have been, and for them both. On and on runs the letter, through woollens, vests, underdrawers, socks, and the ever unsatisfactory pyjama situation: "He is still worse provided with pyjamas than anything . . . He is very rough with his pyjamas, and shirts—tears them unmercifully!" ("I was neither at the hot gates / Nor fought in the warm rain / Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass, / Bitten by flies, fought.") But at least he now has a "chest protector," purchased on the advice of Vivien's mother: "The chest protector is quilted satin, and fits around the neck and has a double breasted chest part. It is particularly valuable for when he goes out in evening dress—which leaves the chest much less protected . . ." And later: "Tom takes cold *very* much more easily than I do. Most of *my* colds are caught from him. I think he would be better if he had one side of his nose cauterised . . ." Who was it that doubted we could

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learn much from Shakespeare's laundry lists? Something like the banality of evil, the everpresent malady of the quotidian, is testified to by these pathetic and oddly gripping outcries of Vivien's, and they provide as much a sense as one could ask for of what the Eliots' life together was like.[2]

The most entertaining and enlivening sections of the correspondence are those in which Eliot is writing to or about Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Richard Aldington, and other modernists. These letters—along with others concerning *The Waste Land* and the *Criterion*—I can merely allude to here, since I wish instead to indicate two moments in which Eliot is particularly expressive about his relationship to his parents. The first occurs in a letter to his brother, written in February of 1919, after their father had died. Eliot says that he wished "father could have had more satisfaction out of his children," but doesn't think that his father's life was a very unhappy one—"and after all none of his children was made for the kind of success that he could have appreciated" (Henry Ware Eliot was President of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company in St. Louis). He goes on to speak more personally:

> I always tried to give as powerful an impression as I could of my position here but it was a prominence essentially too esoteric to be of much use in that way. Now, I find that I think more of his own youthful possibilities that never came to anything: and yet with a great deal of satisfaction; his old-fashioned scholarship! his flute-playing, his drawing. Two of the Cats that I have seem to me quite remarkable. I feel that both he and mother in spite of the strength of their affection were lonely people, and that he was the more lonely of the two, that he hardly knew himself what he was like. In my experience everyone except the fools seem to me warped and stunted.

I think that the loneliness Eliot sensed in his parents' lives was at least as much projected as discovered; but it is the tone here that compels—for those who find Eliot's melancholy compelling—and that final surprising sentence which seems to come out of nowhere and makes the best, glum case for the consequences of not being a fool. (He was about to review *The Education of Henry Adams*.)

The other moment occurs in a letter written to his mother a few weeks later, in which—in the words just quoted about his father—Eliot attempts "to give as powerful an impression" as he could of his

[2] There is one teasing, unannotated reference, in a letter of Vivien's [3 October 1919] written to her friend Mary Hutchinson, to what sounds like Another Man, or at least the possibility of one. After saying how she wants to buy new clothes, but hasn't yet begun, she adds "I dont know what will please Jim most either! Directly that horrible Belgian goes to Bermuda you must begin laying foundation stones for me with Jim." Eliot scholars, get to work!

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literary position. He is explaining why he has turned down an editorial position on the *Athenaeum* and why he will continue on at the bank and avoid the "intrigues of journalism":

> I only write what I want to—*now*—and everyone knows that anything I do write is good. I can influence London opinion and English literature in a better way. I am known to be disinterested. . . . There is a small and select public which regards me as the best living critic, as well as the best living poet, in England. . . . I really think I have far more *influence* on English letters than any other American has ever had, unless it be Henry James. I know a great many people, but there are many more who would like to know me, and I can remain isolated and detached.

Such remarks, he admits, are "conceited." Yet they are also nothing less than a true measurement of the distance he had come. To be able to write it out to one's mother, as if to offer (in Yeats's words from "Among School Children") "A compensation for the pang of his birth, / Or the uncertainty of his setting forth"—this is the success story told by these letters, played out against marital failure, and against physical and psychic distress. Out of that distress he came to formulate his sense of the admirable writer—"perfectly cool and detached, regarding other people's feelings or his own, like a God who has got beyond them; or a person who has dived very deep and come up holding some hitherto unseen submarine creature" (19 Sept. 1917). One recalls, at this point, the familiar sentence from the "Tradition" essay about how "only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from those things." To that may now be added a correction he made, not without its quotient of slyness, to John Gould Fletcher who had read "The Perfect Critic" and decided Eliot was insufficiently generous to the claims of "emotion." Responding to Fletcher, Eliot wrote that "Certainly I don't deny the importance of emotion. I often find it present to me when other people find only frigidity . . ." That was a way of putting it, rather more than satisfactory.

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ROBERT SCHULTZ

Passionate Virtuosity

WHEN WALT WHITMAN ADDRESSES HIS READER in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and speaks of the subtle tie "Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you," he names the desire of any poet to fill the reader, if only for the duration of the poem, with his or her imaginative experience. Not every poet would put it the way Whitman does. His aggressive images of fusing and pouring, with their sexual urgency, can be replaced by the more tactful "Success in Circuit" of Emily Dickinson's famous stanza:

> Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise. . . .

But whatever the approach toward the reader or the metaphor used to describe it, the poet's success lies in surprising us into the presence of his or her truth. It is a difficult and unlikely achievement, but when we sense ourselves transported, when we have willingly assented to the poem's terms, we have known the poet's authority.

If it is difficult for the writer to achieve such authority, it is equally difficult for us to say how it has been achieved. Responding to aptness of cadence and sureness of line in one poet, we feel confident the secret must reside in technical mastery. Then we read another and are convinced that everything depends upon emotional sincerity. And then, of course, we want it all. As the novelist John Barth has written: "Technique in art . . . has about the same value as technique in lovemaking. That is to say, heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal and so does heartless skill, but what you want is passionate virtuosity."

To read Philip Levine's twelfth book of poetry, *A Walk With Tom Jefferson*,[1] is to read the work of a poet who long ago developed the technical mastery to say exactly what he wants to. His is not a poetry of formal symmetries or conspicuous finish, but in nearly every poem of this new book he evokes atmosphere, emotion, and landscape with vividness and precision. In "Winter Words," his favorite

[1] A WALK WITH TOM JEFFERSON, by *Philip Levine*. Alfred A. Knopf. $8.95p.

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bird, the sparrow, is an emblem of his affiliation with the common, the powerless, and the numerous, but it is also convincingly present, an actual bird in an empty parking lot "who picks about the gravel, and . . . invites / me in with a twist of his head, a knock / of his beak." The vigor of this emblematic sparrow is undeniable, communicated by the verbs "twist" and "knock" and by the echoing plosives in "knock" and "beak" at the ends of parallel anapestic phrases.

Levine's art, however, is the kind which hides itself, anxious that manner not distract from its urgent matter, and so this poet's authority is chiefly emotional and moral. As readers of his previous volumes know, Levine is at his strongest when he represents the lives of those who work and persevere in the bleak precincts of desperation. In the present volume, the long title poem presses upon us the ruined landscape of a Detroit neighborhood burned during the 1967 race riots.

> . . . block after block
> of dumping grounds,
> old couches and settees
> burst open, the white innards
> gone gray . . .
> the shattered rib cages
> of beds that couldn't hold
> our ordinary serviceable dreams,
> blue mattresses stained
> in earnest. . . .

"We all come for $5 / a day and we got this!" says Tom Jefferson, a black man working and gardening to survive among the remnants.

Levine's solidarity with the troubled, with the working poor, and with those our society has abandoned is the source of his poetry's dignity and moral authority. But this same commitment—in those few poems in which it seems merely willed, programmatic, or factional—can diminish the power of his work to move us. In "Picture Postcard from the Other World" he professes a *taste* for the melancholic, trivializing the complaints against loneliness and disillusionment elsewhere in the poem. And in "Dog Poem"—a hilarious *tour de force*—one nevertheless wonders whether the poem's humor overcomes the self-pity it is founded upon. Some of the same problems arise in "I Sing the Body Electric," which invites comparison with the Whitman poem of the same title. In it the poet declares his vocation. The morning is cold and windy—March in Hartford, Connecticut—and the poet has flown from California to give a reading of his work:

> I have crossed
> a continent to bring these citizens

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the poems of the snowy mountains,
of the forges of hopelessness,
of the survivors of wars they
never heard of and won't believe.

It is an admirable purpose, but the poem is marred by self-pity (a waitress serves him "hot tea in a cracked cup" so that it spills on his newspaper) and by a bitterness toward the presumed fortunate who are represented by "the cats peering smugly from the homes / of strangers." In Whitman's poem evil is identified in terms of mistaken ideas and actions (the selling of a slave, the corruption of a body) while the poet's embrace of the human remains generous, hopeful, universal. Levine's poetry is diminished when it identifies evil in terms of groups, leaving the work factional in a way that Whitman's never was.

It could be argued that Whitman wrote at a point in our history when it was perhaps easier to believe in the promise of an expanding American vigor and democracy. Belief, in fact, is an important theme in Levine's book. In poem after poem it glimmers, lost, dreamed of, but unreachable. He writes in "Winter Words," in a section set at night in an apartment above 119th Street in New York: "I can almost believe / the sleeping world is the reflection / of heaven." And in the nearly allegorical poem, "The Rat of Faith," the poet resists his instinct to shoot a rat feasting in his orange tree. He lets it live and reports that "Night after night / I wake from dreams of a city / like no other, the bright city / of beauty I thought I'd lost / when I lost my faith that one day / we would come into our lives." Finally, in the title poem, he presents a character who believes as he, himself, cannot. Levine's black, twentieth-century Tom Jefferson, enduring winter in a burned-out neighborhood, trusts that the bulb must freeze in order to sprout at springtime: "Tom believes / the roots need cold, / the earth needs to turn / to ice and snow so a new fire / can start up in the heart / of all that grows." This belief is presented as heroic, but Levine's own seasons are autumn and winter, not springtime, and his tone is elegiac for a society he believes has gone irretrievably wrong. He honors endurance, which is, he says, "the only choice we have."

Like Levine, Garrett Hongo, in *The River of Heaven*,[2] attends with care to those excluded from whatever the American Dream has become in the 1980s. In "The Underworld," he recounts watching a movie—a slapstick comedy—in the old Orpheum in Los Angeles, and listening to the chatter and laughter of "the shimmering, mingled throngs of the poor" who take "a common pain or delight in, just once, / another's humiliation." Hongo has even dedicated a poem, "Choir," to Levine, but here a difference between the two

[2] THE RIVER OF HEAVEN, by *Garrett Hongo*. Alfred A. Knopf. $8.95p.

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poets is apparent. Hongo, the younger poet, seems less alone, less embittered than Levine does in his newest book. The central moment of "Choir" is the poet's recollection of singing in his junior high hallways with a makeshift quartet: himself, "a black kid, a white one, and another Japanese." The "black kid" taught the group "Summertime," and "Together our voices made a sound none could make alone, / 'Harmonics,' Harold said, a tone from the choir itself. . . ." Such moments of connection, usually achieved through storytelling or music, buoy this poetry, lending it a sweetness even as it sings of indignity or loss.

The first part of Hongo's book is carefully structured to make explicit the way music and story can mitigate suffering. A poem, "Mendocino Rose," is about driving through the countryside north of San Francisco, listening to a taped Hawaiian ballad and seeing the viney flower "overtaking all the ghost shacks and broken fences / crumbling with rot. . . ." The poem ends in a revelatory moment when the flower, the ballad, and the poet's own emotion fuse in his desire to make a music that can garland this landscape of decay:

> . . . the roses seemed everywhere around me then,
> profuse and luxurious
> as the rain in its grey robes,
> undulant processionals over the land,
> echoes, in snarls of extravagant color,
> of the music
> and the collapsing shapes
> they seemed to triumph over.

The fact is collapse; the response is a music that follows the contours of collapse but triumphs over it. Therefore, in the poems which immediately follow, the act of commemorating, of saving into music, is primary.

The music he finds, at its most effective, is Whitmanic. He uses the catalogue effectively, as in "Nostalgic Catalogue," and parallel phrasing, as in "*O-Bon*: Dance for the Dead," which builds to an impressive climax:

> I want the cold stone in my hand to pound the earth,
> I want the splash of cool or steaming water to wash my feet,
> I want the dead beside me when I dance, to help me
> flesh the notes of my song, to tell me it's all right.

The poem is a high point in the collection, and it teaches us again that rhetoric and poetry are not best understood as opposing terms. By comparison, several poems in the final third of the book seem lax and prosey, the most extreme of these being "96 Tears." In most of his work, however, Hongo's rich vocabulary and undulant

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syntax hold his stories of loss and remembrance in a secure, distinctive music.

Judith Hemschemeyer's *The Ride Home*[3] achieves authority through a fierce emotional candor which seems almost impatient of technique. The book's first section—the volume's glowing emotional core—presents Hemschemeyer's childhood relationship with her troubled, violent mother. Love and fear propel the speaker through jagged stanzas in which the record of beatings, forgiveness, and sudden anger is barely deflected into the slightly heightened cadences of verse. Gripped by the sheer emotional urgency of these poems, we may feel at first that they are virtually artless. But time and again, as they tighten into moments of realization, rhythms clarify and subtle rhymes and half-rhymes emerge, bringing on the resonance of closure. In "With Only Dream Money" the poet recalls being told by her mother, who is talking in her sleep, to go to the store for milk. The girl is afraid of disobeying even this dream-command, and the last eight lines rise in intensity with obsessive rhymes that indicate her increasing fear:

> But how could I go with only dream money?
>
> And anyway she might talk again
> while I was gone,
>
> telling me to do
> something I really could do
> and had better do,
>
> because what if she was just pretending?
> What if she was watching too?

The technique is repeated, with variations, in several poems, but one of the most affecting instances is at the end of "The Slaughter of the Innocents," a poem in which the speaker has been alarmed at her mother's erratic behavior during an unexpected pregnancy. It ends when the daughter sees her mother rocking and nursing the newborn: "I burst into tears. / She hadn't strangled him! / Bethlehem."

Hemschemeyer's book impresses not only with the extreme situations and emotions it presents, but also with its insight into causes and consequences. It looks back into the sources of the mother's violence, then moves forward, registering the echoes of the poet's own unhappy childhood in her later life. Once we have seen this pattern of generational destruction, the opening line of the book's

[3] THE RIDE HOME, by *Judith Hemschemeyer*. Texas Tech University Press. $16.95; $9.95.

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title poem rings with a haunting prescience: "Maybe the ride home will never end."

Colette Inez recalls a similar childhood in her collection, *Family Life*,[4] but whereas Hemschemeyer draws us into her harrowing vulnerability, Inez seems always to have something staunch to put up against misfortune. Hemschemeyer, choosing to tell her poems of childhood in the voice of the child who suffers, remains the victimized daughter; Inez, looking back in maturity, speaks with poise and measure, and becomes the parent to her parents, sympathizing, pitying, forgiving. This difference registers itself in the poetics of the two poets. Hemschemeyer gains emotional immediacy by writing in lines and stanzas that give the illusion of extemporaneous speech; but Inez, in her more intricate lines, presents a self constructed, miraculously, *in spite of* her biography.

Inez's father was a priest and her mother a scholar. She spent early childhood in a Brussels orphanage, then was placed in an American foster home where her first foster mother died of alcoholism and her second was abusive. Early sections of the book retrace this history before later ones carry us into her fortunate present.

Inez does not buy her poise with emotional detachment. She is engaged but controlled as she imagines the affair which brought her into the world:

> she is naked, heavy breasts graze the water
> as she wades into the river. In a shadowy cove,
> the body swims languorously, one arm, then another
> pulling her forward to the far shore.
> There my father writes marginal notes on the edges
> of a manuscript. He will comb her wet hair.
> She will hum a song.

In the same poem she calls her parents, with equal measures of pity and scorn, "two scholars humbled by illicit love, / my lettered sires who signed me away."

The act of writing, which signed her away, is appropriated by Inez and made the instrument of her own self-assurance. At the height of her strength as poet, she assumes the authority not only to elegize her father, but also to intercede on behalf of this "priest who sired a child," wanting to "ease his grief in the afterlife." And in an exhilarating simile she transforms herself from illegitimate daughter to dispensation of the Holy Father: "I, his bastard, bid for calm / like a Papal See in a murmur of signs." It is no censure, then, to say that Inez's poetry usually seems more "written" than Hemschemeyer's. Its crafted quality lends dignity without diminishing

[4] FAMILY LIFE, by *Colette Inez*. Story Line Press. $8.00p.

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vigor, and the strongest poems here are those early in the collection in which the lines often seem to approach traditional meters.

Elizabeth Seydel Morgan's *Parties*,[5] like the books by Hemschemeyer and Inez, deals with family relations and maturation, and there are four strong poems about her mother, but this book does not center upon autobiography as do the others. Instead, it is organized to represent life in its largest patterns, though it is able to remain at the same time concrete and vivid. The opening section treats initiations and eros with an uncanny mixture of directness and delicacy; the second plunges fully into experience, ranging through its fiercer passions and introducing the challenges of misfortune and failure; and the third takes on most centrally the matters of age and art.

The title poems of the book's three parts tell the essential story. Each is spoken by a woman at a party, but at three different parties at three distinct moments of life. And each poem stands like an ideogram over its section, representing innocence, then experience, then a complex synthesis of the two. The first is "The Party Before the Party," in which the speaker tips between childhood and adulthood. "Laughter was light, light / was light, iced drinks were light / at the party before the party," she tells us, watching the younger children play and half-wishing to join them. But then:

> I was a grownup, wearing a sundress
> that left my back bare. You
> came up beside me and lightly,
> but with your whole hand,
> touched me there.

The key words of the poem and the whole section are "light" and "touch." All is light and new, laced with the excitement of discovery, and the slightest touch is profoundly memorable. The poet's own touch is remarkably light in these poems, mixing subtlety and clarity in a manner almost Chinese. In the lines just quoted, her craft is apparent in the meaningful closural rhyme of "there" and "bare," in the emphasis placed upon the word "You" by its isolation at the end of its line, and in the deft contrast between the word "lightly" and the phrase, "but with your whole hand," which immediately follows.

After the nearly Edenic first section, the second opens with a fall. Here is its title poem, "The Party," quoted entire:

> It's an old story, what happens later.
> How dark the dance is, how loud, how drunk.

[5] PARTIES, by *Elizabeth Seydel Morgan*. Louisiana State University Press. $13.95; $6.95.

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> Talking is shouting, touching a joke.
> Shadows of solo dancers writhe like snakes
> up the walls of the barn to the rafters
> and sink down again when the music breaks,
> and rise and fall, and rise and fall in the smoke.

This is a teen barn party, Dante's *Inferno*, and Plato's cave, all present in images at once concrete and archetypal. Here the lightness of the first section is plunged into darkness and noise. End rhymes and plosive "k" sounds replace subtleties of internal rhyme and soft assonance. Touching is now a joke, the clear-eyed eros of part one become the writhing of snakes. And, after this break with prelapsarian joy, the poems of part two explore the powerfully mixed nature of adult experience.

The book's third section continues and widens the exploration of mature experience, ending with "The Luncheon of the Boating Party," in which Renoir's painting by that title and Morgan's concluding party overlay one another in a meditation on change and the power of art to preserve. Here, in a poem that deliberately echoes the book's opening one, the light touch of the first section survives: "Paul's bare forearm rests / on the tablecloth. My fingers uncurl / from the stem of the wineglass and spread / until my little finger touches the fine hair / on his wrist." After the events of the book's middle—marriage, children, separation, confrontations with fear and mortality—the persistence of a kind of innocence here is poignant, almost heroic, as it resists the corrosive action of experience under which "the human body becomes almost abstract." This is Morgan's first full-length collection, published at the age of forty-nine, and perhaps for this reason she has been able to comprehend the experience of several stages of life in a book exceptional in its integrity and coherence.

Among the books reviewed here, Bruce Weigl's *Song of Napalm*[6] deals with the most extreme experience—the Vietnam War as known by a combatant. Weigl served with the First Air Cavalry in Vietnam during 1967–68, and his book about departing for the war, living through it, and living after it is almost unbearable to read, but necessary. Because the realities of war are virtually unimaginable—sometimes even to its participants—we need books like this which tell us, with accuracy, what war is like.

At one point Weigl's speaker, back home and haunted by his memories, says: "I am trying to say this straight." And indeed, this poetry tells its story straight, in a gritty free verse which can be both violent and lyrical. In poems such as "Girl at the Chu Lai Laundry," "Temple Near Quang Tri, Not on the Map," "The Last Lie," and "Monkey," the book presents a war experience pervaded by terror

[6] SONG OF NAPALM, by *Bruce Weigl*. Atlantic Monthly Press. $13.95.

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and flashes of beauty. We see grief surrounded by thoughtless cruelty; we see, in the perverting context of war, the sexuality of violence and the violence of sex; and we see history made out of timeless, obdurate moments.

In "Monkey," Weigl's usual realism gives way, under the necessity of accuracy, to a rant which communicates a terrifying loss of control under circumstances of extreme pressure:

> Good times bad times sleep
> get up work. Sleep get up
> good times bad times.
>
> Work eat sleep good bad work times.
> I like a certain cartoon of wounds.
> The water which refused to dry.
> I like a little unaccustomed mercy.
> Pulling the trigger is all we have.
> I hear a child.

When the speaker temporarily recovers self-possession, he says, as much in fatigue as sorrow: "I'm twenty-five years old, / quiet, tired of the same mistakes, / the same greed, the same past. / The same past with its bleat / and pound of the dead. . . ." In the desperate hope that we might not make "the same mistakes," Weigl bears true witness to the reality of war, and his work takes its place alongside the strongest war poetry of this century. (One is reminded, particularly, of the poems written by Isaac Rosenberg before he was killed in World War I.) In the end, Weigl renders the terrible beauty of a sensibility which denies nothing, forgets nothing, and refuses to cease being human. His work reminds us that the end of technique is accuracy, so that poetry can hold the way it feels to be alive, so that reading the accurate poems we can be, each of us, less alone.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

A Sky Lit with Artillery: The Poems of Louis Simpson

OF THE EIGHT INDIVIDUAL AND TWO SELECTED VOLUMES that Louis Simpson has written and published since 1949, four are definitive books in the development of twentieth-century American poetry. They include *The Arrivistes: Poems 1940–1949*, *At the End of the Open Road* (1963), *Searching for the Ox* (1976), and *The Best Hour of the Night* (1983). Though all ten volumes, which are handsomely represented in the new book,[1] contain individual poems of lasting value, these four most command our retrospective attention. They do so because their poems introduce and perfect Simpson's unique characteristics in manipulating form and content, characteristics that poets who came after him have had to contend with and learn from in the struggle to carve out their own styles. There is no simpler proof of a poet's importance to his literature than his work becoming one standard by which all future efforts are measured.

The poetic forms of Simpson's first book, *The Arrivistes*, and the two collections that followed it, *Good News of Death and Other Poems* (1955) and *A Dream of Governors* (1959), were strictly traditional; their content was haunted by the Second World War. As a member of the 101st Airborne Division, Simpson had suffered and endured firsthand the dehumanizing conflict and survived to bear witness to it. "Arm in Arm," "Resistance," and "Carentan O Carentan" from the first book, "Memories of a Lost War," "The Battle," "The Runner," and others from the two books that followed provide us with the most powerful poems about war ever written by an American:

> Most clearly of that battle I remember
> The tiredness in eyes, how hands looked thin
> Around a cigarette, and the bright ember
> Would pulse with all the life there was within.
>
> "The Battle"

Criticized by Robert Bly and other early reviewers for employing traditional forms to express grim modern subjects (criticism that given today's resurgence of form sounds naive), Simpson was aware of something the critics missed. Traditional forms proved essential

[1] COLLECTED POEMS, by *Louis Simpson*. Paragon House. $24.95.

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to the true representation of such horror. The forms themselves, impeccably executed, created a tense and fragile vessel for the content, establishing the sense of irony and the rush of discovery that comes of form incessantly scratching against content. These poems enable us to face our own capacity for suffering. They restore our humanity by coherently giving us the incoherent voice of the masses gone mad, the voice of wholesale killing and destruction.

Simpson's first book, and the two that followed, made up the definitive statement in poetry about a terrible period in our history. His second seminal volume, *At the End of the Open Road*, seems now more than ever *the* poetry volume of the sixties.

Most obvious to its reader then was the poet's departure from traditional form. Reflecting the then current preoccupation with the image, Simpson's relaxed and suggestive free verse line still retained the echo of a formal cadence. What Thom Gunn called Simpson's "mastery over the single line" was actually his command of phrasing. It set him apart from the other popular imagist poets. Richard Howard noted this when he wrote that Simpson "had achieved a cadence when he merely *spoke*, barely raising his voice above the unquestioned prose of the quotidian."

"The secret," Athridat tells young Peter in the title poem of Simpson's first book, "is to overhear the world . . . enough to tell a story." Though nearly every poet claims to be sensitive to the poetry in the way we speak, Simpson has heard and reproduced that poetry more consistently than anyone else. He has been so successful at it that the free verse poems from *At the End of the Open Road* on through his body of work often possess more formal virtues than many contemporary poems in traditional forms.

Complementing this new direction in the use of form was a timely expansion of place, subject, and point of view. The poet's preoccupation with the aftershocks of global war affected his intense encounter with his European family history and his adopted country's headlong rush to subjugate its natural environment. In an earlier poem the music of Orpheus "grieves the moon" and "tells the water of his loss." In the poem that begins *At the End of the Open Road*, "In California," "The great cloud-wagons move / outward still, dreaming of a Pacific." The profound shift here is away from Orpheus interacting with the natural world to nameless, faceless wanderers only dreaming of it. In poem after poem of this fourth book Simpson's characters represent us, the compromised modern tribe, wholly American, full of hope but just waking to the hard news that our national promise has been played out.

This is a sad message, and Simpson can be a sinister spokesman. The tone, however, generally rises above bitterness, finding balance in tenderness, irony, and grim humor. On the larger scale of the book itself, we observe the poet's discovery of the perfect balance between the public and private springs of poetry. We see a poet

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joining the common exterior reality of war and the settlement and development of the North American continent gone wild with the grainy interior psychology of family history and the process of coming to terms with one's self.

Given the assured and flawless expression of so many essential discoveries in these poems, it is not hard to conclude that no other book of poetry spoke so clearly for its time while leading the way to concerns that would dominate the ensuing decades.

A transitional stop on Simpson's journey can be observed in his 1971 book, *Adventures of the Letter I*. Here the poet's Russian ancestry moves to center stage. This long look at personal origins is in sympathy with many poets' return to their own past. Although Simpson is more convincing than most, the great value of these poems can be best appreciated when taking into account the book that followed this one five years later. For by setting poems in Russia and dealing with characters whose experiences were remote from his own, Simpson was perfecting his restraint, the emotional yet passionate distance that dramatic poetry requires. With the specter of family history all about them, these poems also forced him to look more deeply into himself.

Searching for the Ox (1976) proves that Simpson learned those lessons well. I could argue that all seventeen poems reprinted from the original book are masterpieces, and many are the kind of poem we had not seen before. We had met their precursors in earlier poems by Louis Simpson, of course, but here the dramatic element, in concert with the poet's native lyric gift, was heightened and elongated as never before. In poems like "Venus in the Tropics," "Dinner at the Sea-View Inn," and "The Psyche of Riverside Drive," painful personal experience opens up to become a collective emotional tableau:

> She always wore gloves and a broad hat.
> To protect her complexion,
> she told us. She was extremely sensitive.
> All redheaded people were.
>
> "She's a redhead, like Clara Bow,"
> our father wrote in his letter.
>
> "The Red Death," said my grandmother
> twenty years later, on Eastern Parkway
> in Brooklyn. We were talking about my father.
> She thought he must have been ill—
> not in his right mind—to marry a typist
> and leave her practically everything.
>
> How else to explain it, such an intelligent man?
> "Venus in the Tropics"

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The *she* in this excerpt from the poem's second part is the narrator's stepmother. Earlier in the poem, we observe that her relationship with her stepson is strained, and in the passage above we find that the father's natural family will be disinherited for her sake. Given this scenario, we would expect the conventional bitter poem of the wronged, sensitive narrator. But his presentation of the scene and its characters is remarkably expansive and even. We are made to understand the stepmother's difficult position, both in the family and as an outsider to its environment through the reference to her complexion; the father comparing her to the movie actress Clara Bow makes more tangible his attraction for this "typist"; we grasp the grandmother's bitterness coupled with the lovely example of her wistful sympathy as she ascribes the father's poor judgement to illness; the section ending with the question, with the narrator maintaining silence, also suggests the narrator's point of view. By giving us the scene in this way, the narrator resists the temptation to rise above the situation by pronouncing judgement on its actors. His silence suggests his understated compassion for the world as it is.

As Simpson's humanity and dramatic grandeur assume new dimensions, *Searching for the Ox* also brings into sharp focus another key strength this poet had been developing all along. No less than nine of these poems are sequences. This device, which Simpson has liberally used since his first book, has been popular with many American poets. Usually, the sequence makes a bridge between a traditional narrative and a more personal meditation. Increasingly influenced by the cinematic montage's sense of fractured reality, the sequence includes more material than a short poem. Extending the poem's length, it also releases the material from the need to adhere to a conventional pattern of time passing.

Unfortunately, most poets who practice the sequence regard its sections as independent platforms on which they may indulge tedious self-probing exercises. Too often meditation and wandering prose overwhelm the whole. In Simpson's sequences, the assembled snapshots consist of dramatic situations in which personal revelations are implied, not baldly stated. When Simpson's narrator does make an assertion, it grows naturally out of the action contained in the scene.

A major element of the scene's action is the language of the poem, and Simpson's phrasing is usually appropriate for each individual scene. To read carefully a series of his lines in these poems is to become convinced that they could not be worded, broken, or grouped in any other way. This is true of Simpson's poems in general, but it is especially appreciated in the sequence where the poet must keep in mind—and so few do—that individual segments must be connected by form *and* content. As Simpson's lines negotiate the tightrope between verse and prose, the dramatic tension that results enriches the dramatic sweep of the complete poem. Simpson knows

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that to miss the drama of human transactions is to drain them of humanity itself. By aggressively avoiding this common error, he has defined our dramatic lyric sequence.

These great gains in form and content were carried over into *Caviare at the Funeral* (1980) and the new poems of *People Live Here: Selected Poems 1949–1983* (1983). But a companion publication to the latter title, *The Best Hour of the Night* (1983), contained Simpson's fourth ground-breaking group of poems.

Appearing early in the decade that has seen narrative restore to poetry subjects and vitality, *The Best Hour of the Night* represents the finest dramatic narratives of the American middle class yet written. In language and in line the poems are similar to Simpson's practice since *Searching for the Ox*, but the tone and point of view are ever more expansive and compassionate. Significantly, the narrator now often plays a more active part in the scene, though he does so without becoming the dominant actor. For this reason he is more believable than the narrators of most of Simpson's peers and the younger poets working in narrative.

The best example occurs in the long centerpiece, "The Previous Tenant," which is arguably Simpson's finest poem. The first-person narrator moves into a cottage in an upscale community ironically called Point Mercy. Over the course of a snowy winter, through his landlord's accounts, gossip, and a packet of letters he finds "Behind the Perry Masons and Agatha Christies," he pieces together the arrival and fall of his predecessor, a surgeon at Mercy Hospital. As he himself labors to adjust to the community, the narrator goes over the details of the surgeon's attempts to fit in by speaking at village meetings and joining the Yacht Club, the Golf Club, the Garden Club. He thinks of the surgeon's affair with the wife of a patient, the beating her brothers gave him, his wife filing for divorce, the staid community's unforgiving reaction to the scandal. Then he imagines the nights the surgeon must have spent in the cottage, not unlike the nights he now spends there himself. In time he comes to see through the community's shallow cheerfulness masking racial prejudice and intolerance, and this leads him to comment brazenly at a luncheon that the surgeon and his lover "are better than the rest of us." In the end he sympathizes with the poem's original outcasts.

This maturing, ambitious personal journey occurs repeatedly in the poems of this book, creating a world most of us know but may not have looked at as deeply as we should. With a new, profound humility, Simpson is able to range widely from one life to another, dismissing no character, giving each his due.

A final example should support this point. In "How to Live on Long Island," Jim sits down to pay his bills. As he writes out checks and seals envelopes, he thinks of families like his with "husbands writing checks, / wives studying fund-raising," concluding that they

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remind him of "fireflies / that shine for a night and die." He thinks of how nothing, "Not even stones" of contemporary American life will survive. Then the poet executes one of the great transitions in our poetry:

> Jim has a hobby: fishing.
> Last year he flew to Alaska.
> Cold the salmon stream,
> dark the Douglas firs,
> and the pure stars are cold.

In one line the content of the poem has expanded, perfectly integrating the incongruous setting of Jim's hobby in the next three stanzas with his everyday life, which we have so thoroughly entered in the preceding six. The reliance on a more traditional, rhetorical cadence in the last three lines of the stanza quoted above evokes the exotic landscape of Alaska and the freedom of the fishing trip. We hear about Jim's success on one trip in particular, but the narrator suddenly concludes that "They do a lot of drinking in Alaska." They do so because they cannot stand to live there, just as Jim "cannot stand Long Island / without flying to Alaska." So we endlessly circle one another, much as our planet circles the sun. We need one another in similar ways, too. Simpson's poems show us how that need is acted out, discouraged, and satisfied.

Depths Beyond Happiness,[2] a collection of critical writing on the poetry and prose of Louis Simpson edited by Hank Lazer and published in the University of Michigan Press's *Under Discussion* series, is a timely, useful companion to *Collected Poems*. In bringing together these forty-eight reviews, one letter, and twelve essays, Lazer's aim is to reach "readers who wish to see what others have said about Louis Simpson's poetry and . . . writers who may be about to make their own contribution to the criticism of Simpson's work." He also believes that the chronological presentation of these pieces "may aid the reader, indirectly, in acquiring a sense of recent American literary history."

The critical writing covers nearly forty years, and Lazer is correct in claiming that, considered as a body, it does make better sense of a segment of our literary past. Early on there is Randall Jarrell's well-known positive notice of Simpson's first book, beginning with "There isn't a good poem in *The Arrivistes*, but Louis Simpson is as promising a new poet as I've read in some time." There is John Ciardi reviewing Simpson's second book, contradicting Jarrell's particular criticisms all the way. Reviews by Thom Gunn, Peter Davi-

[2] ON LOUIS SIMPSON: Depths Beyond Happiness, ed. by *Hank Lazer*. University of Michigan Press. $27.50; $11.95.

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son, and Daniel Hoffman contain dismissals of Simpson's long narratives, including the classic "The Runner," making use of the by now discredited assertion that stories are better told in prose than in verse.

Much later, in a review of *People Live Here*, M. L. Rosenthal accurately points to Simpson's multi-cultural background and psychological wounding in the war as the major influences on his writing. There is also Robert Bly, in three short essay-reviews, praising Simpson's genius while expressing strong reservations about the poems' conflict between form and content. There are worthwhile longer essays by Richard Howard, Ronald Moran, Lazer himself, and an especially astute piece by the English writer, C. B. Cox. And there is an early review by William Arrowsmith that contains the following: "But this is a remarkable talent, and one, unless I am mistaken, exactly suited by temperament and skill to show us how verse-drama might really be written, for Mr. Simpson's real ability is *dramatic* verse, and yet his lyric abilities are good enough that they promise to support, without usurping, his dramatic sense." Obviously this insight regarding Simpson's equal gifts in the lyric and narrative has been reinforced in the last thirty-three years.

Finally, my comments on these two books provide an appropriate occasion to hazard an opinon about Louis Simpson's ultimate contribution to American poetry. It is clear to me that he means more to our literature than any of the writers of the Lowell-Berryman generation; in a body of work (though perhaps not in one individual poem), he shows a wider range of experience and more consistent, less ambiguous morality than Eliot; in creating a distinctly American idiom he often surpasses Dr. Williams. The great American poets, both living and dead, must count him as one of their company.

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JAMES FINN COTTER

Pagels's Paradise Lost

IN THE EPILOGUE OF HER NEW BOOK,[1] Elaine Pagels tells us that, dissatisfied with contemporary Christianity, she turned to the earliest Christians for answers. She assumed that in that era, when the movement was pristine and primitive, things were simpler and purer. She found the opposite to be true: the movement was diversified, divided by controversy, and complex.

So what else is new?

Well, what Pagels found sounds strangely familiar, a not-so-distant mirror of our own time: martyrs, particularly women, ready to lose their lives rather than surrender their freedom to the will of the State; Gnostics, eager to include women in their services and open-minded in judging moral questions on the basis of situational ethics rather than by precept or authority; leaders like John Chrysostom who opposed wealth and position in ecclesiastical and civil hierarchies; and thinkers like Pelagius who insisted on the goodness of nature and the integrity of free will against Augustine's vision of a world riddled by original sin.

What happened? The martyrs perished, the protesters were silenced, the Gnostics suppressed, Chrysostom exiled, Pelagius condemned, and Augustine canonized. If only things had turned out differently, if only the orthodox had lost and the free spirits had won. Christianity and western civilization would not be the embarrassment they are to enlightened folk today. Certainly, there would have been fewer changes to be made in the contemporary church.

Pagels lets you draw such conclusions for yourself. The danger here, of course, is wishful thinking, history as a series of neatly discovered causes, anachronisms disguised as real ideas or events, and in many instances not history at all. To make freedom the central issue in the first centuries of Christian persecution takes some stretching of the imagination and the texts. The martyrologies tell us the saints died for their faith in Jesus as Lord; they hardly thought of themselves as freedom fighters. If given a choice—except for ardent souls like Ignatius of Antioch—they wanted to go on living. Refusing to sacrifice to the emperor as god, they were put to death for their infidelity. They had no choice but to obey their Lord or deny him. "Freedom," as we know it, hardly existed as "the classical proclama-

[1]ADAM, EVE, AND THE SERPENT, by *Elaine Pagels*. Random House. $17.95.

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tion" Pagels claims. In the texts she quotes it is mentioned in passing, never is it the focus of the Christian message.

The Gnostics are another problem. Pagels treats them as a Christian sect when they may have pre-dated Christianity and existed as an independent syncretic religion. They penetrated Christianity, but seem to have remained on the fringes. Gnostics held so many beliefs that one can find evidence for almost any religious theory in their enigmatic writings. As she did in her *Gnostic Gospels*, which I reviewed in the Summer 1980 issue of *The Hudson Review*, Pagels has a field day manipulating their texts. Here is "an extraordinary poem," called *Thunder: Perfect Mind*, as she quotes it:

> I am the first and the last.
> I am the honored one and the scorned one.
> I am the whore and the holy one.
> I am the wife and the virgin.
> I am the bride and the bridegroom,
> and it is my husband who begot me.
> I am knowledge and ignorance. . . .
> I am foolish and I am wise. . . .
> I am the one whom they call life [Eve]
> and you have called Death. . . .

The subject of this poem, she says, "depicts the spirit, manifested variously as Wisdom and as Eve." George MacRae, in his introduction to it in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, writes: "In terms of religious tradition *Thunder: Perfect Mind* is difficult to classify. It presents no distinctively Jewish, Christian, or Gnostic themes, nor does it seem to presuppose a particular Gnostic myth." To add to the problem of analysis, Pagels has actually quoted as a single conflation five separate passages scattered over five pages. The name "Eve" does not appear anywhere in the poem; Pagels does put it in square brackets, but the editors also use such brackets in the text. How is the reader to know what is going on?

Again, Pagels quotes *The Secret Book of John* as declaring: "I am the intelligence of the pure life," when the original reads "pure light." And she cites the *Gospel of Philip*: "The law was the tree. . . . For when [the law] said, 'Eat this, do not eat that,' it became the beginning of death." In the *Nag Hammadi* text God speaks these lines, not the law. The differences are minor, but they form part of the mosaic portraying the Gnostics as Pagels sees them and not as they really were.

Pagels persists in stereotyping orthodox Christians as law-abiding formalists who believe in a transcendent deity while Gnostics are true-believers open to an immanent divine presence. Jesus' words, "Live on in me and I in you," Paul's claim, "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me," Augustine's cry, "You are more intimate to me than I am to myself," the Eucharist, interior prayer, the mystics, none of these

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find a place in Pagels's polemics. For her, no orthodox Christian can say with the Hindu of his God, "I *am* Thou." Why not? What else is Incarnation? "God became man that we may become God," Athanasius and Thomas Aquinas tell us. Meister Eckhart's condemnation, which Pagels naturally drags up, was mired in the politics of its day and proves nothing. Her narrow-minded treatment of "the orthodox" (the name almost hisses in her pages) gives away the game she is playing.

Pagels covers the first five centuries selectively to support her thesis that after Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 313 a "cataclysmic transformation" occurred. The thesis is hardly new but her examination of commentaries on the first chapters of Genesis does cover fresh ground. The reader learns a good deal about the period; the controversies are vigorously presented, and the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas is especially fascinating in Herbert Musurillo's lively translation. Chrysostom rightly comes across as an admirable bishop and Justin Martyr is an appealing apologist. Jerome and Augustine, however, appear as political opportunists and male chauvinists, which they probably were.

Is the book an accurate picture of the era? Pagels misrepresents Christianity. The Incarnation finds no room in the inn of her thinking; the sacraments, grace, charity, faith have no part in her historical vision. Only doctrines matter and only ideas make things happen. For Pagels the past is a text to be reduced to practical political issues. Jesus himself appears not as the crucified and risen Lord but as the preacher of a new doctrine. His "radical message" undergoes endless revisions at the hands of his followers. Pagels carefully selects her passages and, if one sounds suitably persuasive, she repeats it. She adds emphasis or shifts emphasis to suit her purpose. She magnifies small issues and ignores main ones. She sprinkles her book with terms like "shockingly" and "sadly," as if she too can barely believe what these men are saying about freedom, marriage, sin, and human behavior. She stacks the deck, to make matters work out the way that suits her best. To her innocent readers she is the serpent in the Garden.

In the controversy between Jerome and Jovinian, for example, Pagels makes Jovinian seem like a reasonable monk who, disenchanted with the ascetic life, saw value in a less rigorous way of living. In the debate about the superiority of virginity over marriage, the position which Jerome obstreperously defended, Jovinian appears correct and his subsequent condemnation incredible. Pagels never tells us that Jovinian was condemned for claiming that a person baptized with water and the Spirit cannot commit sin, for holding that all sins are equal, and for denying the virgin birth. In finding no worth in asceticism, Jovinian went against the grain of all religious tradition. Of course he was wrong, but not according to Pagels.

In Augustine's controversy with Pelagius and his follower Julian,

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Pagels ignores the question of grace, the essential issue for Augustine. She makes the extraordinary statement that Augustine "denied that human beings possess any capacity whatever for free will." Augustine, the author of "On Free Will" and "On Grace and Free Will," has been called "the chief exponent of free will in the early church." He is the pastor who told his listeners: "Love, and do what you will." For him the will was not mere choice between good and evil; to do evil meant to lose your power of will. Free will is a love, a pleasure, an impulse and pressure. Sin prevents people from being spontaneous and caring. For Pelagius, the will was self-centered and based on self-control. Pagels is saddened that Pelagius lost the argument and was condemned. But Pelagius has had a long life. As a boy growing up in Irish Catholic Boston, I and everyone else were all semi-Pelagians at heart. Do not believe everything you read.

Of course, Augustine was wrong on a number of counts. He was forever changing his mind and contradicting himself. His *Retractions* reviews his 330 works and repudiates passages or works he no longer agreed with. Such is the prerogative or curse of old age: second thoughts. Thomas Aquinas dismissed his views of nature as contradictory: how can nature be good and utterly depraved? The Council of Trent made it clear that on the question of grace and freedom, Augustine was as fallible as his opponents. The history of the church has not been as monolithic as Pagels would have us believe, and many at the time were troubled by Augustine's exaggerations. He was an existentialist, gloomy, but no life-denier. He was Kierkegaard and Pelagius Norman Vincent Peale. "May nothing horrible happen, nothing inhuman," Augustine says, wanting only good and not bad for himself and others. But good comes from God who became human for our sake, to rescue us from evil. For Pelagius, Christ set a good example and leaves the rest up to us. Older now and no longer living in Boston, I am convinced that Augustine is right—most of the time.

Much of what Pagels writes about the rigorist traditional views of marriage and virginity is probably true, if one-sided. The ideas were not cast in tablets of stone as she seems to think. Surely she exaggerates when she claims that Jesus and Paul never endorsed "procreation in marriage": what does "A man shall cleave to his wife and the two shall be one flesh" imply? In the first century celibacy was a response to an eschatological crisis and not the outcome of a negative attitude toward sex. With the kingdom at hand why worry about sexual fulfillment? The marriage feast at Cana, however, was always seen as a sign of the Lord's blessing on young couples. You find no Cana in Pagels's exegesis.

Augustine's idea that some sin—even if only venial—had to be attached to lovemaking for married couples wanting children seemed harsh then and has seemed so ever since. It never became church teaching. The first church council to deal with sexual morality was

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Vatican II in 1974; it declared that the actions of marital sexuality "signify and promote that mutual self-giving by which spouses enrich each other with a joyful and thankful will." Augustine himself is ambivalent on the subject. He wrote "On the Good of Marriage" in which he upholds the sacredness of married life as a sacrament and praises fidelity as a source of salvation. He states that the couple should not refuse one another and both partners must agree if they are to abstain from sex. He believed that a humble mother pleases God more than her proud virgin daughter. Augustine is not the harsh marriage-hater Pagels makes him out to be. Jerome, on the other hand, overstated his case for virginity and made such wild claims that even his friends balked. Without him, however, we would not have had the Wife of Bath.

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge of this topic. Jean Leclerq recently wrote on monastic twelfth-century views in *Monks on Marriage*; monks were sympathetic and had plenty of insights on marital relations. In 1650, the Jesuit theologian Thomas Sanchez attacked Augustine's rigorist views, and much has been written on religion and sex in the past decades. You would know nothing about these developments in reading Pagels. She writes as though she is pioneering some new and sensational discovery about that old story in the Garden. Some terrible secret has been at last revealed! Augustine had sexual hangups and they have darkened the centuries! Read all about it!

The mystery of Christianity here is treated as a whodunit, and Augustine is the villain: "From the fifth century on, Augustine's pessimistic views of sexuality, politics, and human nature would become the dominant influence on western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, and color all western culture, Christian or not, ever since." How did this disaster occur? "The eventual triumph of Augustine's theology required, however, the capitulation of all who held the classical proclamation concerning human freedom, once so widely regarded as the heart of the Christian gospel."[2] Regarded by whom? With such sweeping cause-and-effect conclusions, Pagels draws her study to a close. Reader, beware!

Pagels writes well and argues persuasively. It is easy to see why her books are so popular. She explains so much and makes it clear how down through the centuries we landed in the mess of the present. Much is informative, more is shaded and distorted to fit her preconceived thesis. She knows who did it from the start. When she states that her task is "historical investigation" and not "religious inquiry," she sounds sincere, but the statement has to be weighed carefully. Her

[2] Lest I be accused of following Pagels's own practice, I admit that these two quotations are pages apart in her book, but I believe they accurately sum up the author's conclusions.

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own confession that "dissatisfied with the representatives of Christianity" she turned to the origins of the early church certainly implies a "religious inquiry" that masks itself, consciously, as objective history.

Pagels answers those who say that she projects her own ideas into the text by first denying it and then admitting it is impossible—and not even desirable—not to make such projections. She quotes Foucault on "the politics of truth" and says that "what each of us perceives and acts upon as true has much to do with our situation, social, political, cultural, religious, or philosophical." "What is truth?" as Pilate asked Jesus, not waiting for an answer. To a colleague who objected that religious ideas cannot be reduced to political agendas, she responds by agreeing and then stating that "moral choices often are political choices." In Boston we called this "talking out of both sides of your mouth." Today it is fashionable as literary and historical theory.

How can you not trust a writer who documents every statement, who seems so fair-handed and scholarly, whose book contains twenty pages of closely written notes with references to French and German as well as English criticism? As compared to *The Gnostic Gospels*, where the notes would not pass the scrutiny of a freshman English instructor, this is a much more carefully researched book.[3] Pagels has learned how to deal with her critics. As the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion at Princeton University and the recipient of a MacArthur Prize Fellowship, Pagels is a formidable academic figure. Whether or not her "brilliant new book," to quote its blurb, is "a work that will prove a landmark of historical thought and profoundly affect all future interpretations of the historical meaning of Christianity" remains to be seen.

[3] An anecdote. When Raymond Brown wrote a critical review of *The Gnostic Gospels* for the *New York Times Book Review*, Pagels answered by citing Tertullian to prove she was following her sources. Curious, I tracked down the quotation to find that she had once again changed the wording to fit her interpretation. I rushed off a letter to the *Times*; it was not published. *The Gnostic Gospels* won the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. So it goes.

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JAY PARINI

Victor Brombert and the Romantics

"PERHAPS THE TROUBLE IS THAT SO FEW of the practicing critics aiming at theoretical sophistication have retained a sense of a personal voice," writes Victor Brombert in *The Hidden Reader*.[1] A sense of crisis governs this book of essays on nineteenth-century French writers, signaled in the polemical opening chapter, "Approaches." "The sad truth," Brombert says, "is that literary studies have been in increasing danger of losing touch with the general cultivated public by locking themselves up in a number of hermetic discourses. Even colleagues specializing in the field readily admit—in moments of lucid despondency—that they can no longer understand one another." I can happily report that *The Hidden Reader*, like all of Brombert's work, can be read and admired by almost anyone with an interest in literature; it stands squarely in the tradition of humanistic criticism without, somehow, seeming theoretically ignorant. As such, it is a welcome volume by one of our most consistently lucid and humane critics.

Ironically, for all Brombert's insistence on working against the grain of contemporary theory, his emphasis here on a "hidden" reader is remarkably current. The title, indeed, is somewhat misleading. What Brombert draws us toward, in fact, is a discovery of the hidden writer—the ambivalent or unconscious writer who creates a shadow text to the overt text which, invisibly and invariably, undoes the primary text. This, of course, is the point of most Deconstructive readings: to unmask the hidden text, the buried agenda, the subversive meaning that "unwrites" the novel or poem as it is being written. There's nothing new in this. What Brombert has done, in effect, is put the insights of contemporary theory into a language reminiscent of the old-fashioned humanistic criticism so despised by theorists. In doing this, he blazes a way toward an even newer New Criticism, one that remains faithful to the text but which recognizes that every text is a complex thing, a web with many strands, some of which work against or countermine the motions of the primary strands.

The Hidden Reader was not written as a book, per se. It consists of eighteen separate essays on nineteenth-century Romantic writers in France—the exception being a final essay on T.S. Eliot and his neg-

[1] THE HIDDEN READER: Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, Baudelaire, Flaubert, by *Victor Brombert*. Harvard University Press. $27.50.

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ative opinion of the Romantics. Among the most intriguing essays here are those on Victor Hugo, whom Brombert has read more closely than anyone else in our time. These essays form a kind of addendum to his magisterial study, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel* (1984). Working through a number of key images in Hugo's major novels—the guillotine, the Tower of Babel, the earthly city, the sea—Brombert was able to demonstrate the overwhelming thematic consistency of Hugo's vast corpus, finding in the novels certain recurring motifs, such as the violence of history, revolution, and the formation of the masses. On the latter, Hugo's paradoxical thinking is shrewdly analyzed.

Hugo was the supreme egotist, lording it over his age as no other writer has done before or since. Poet, playwright, critic, novelist: he dominated the stage of nineteenth-century French culture. Like most self-appointed aristocrats, he secretly feared—even detested—the mob, taking a classically Horatian stance: *Odi profanum vulgis—et arceo* ("I detest the vulgar mob, and push them away"). This attitude notwithstanding, he also worshipped "the masses," regarding them as his true audience. As Hugo put it himself in a discussion of the role of the audience in theatrical productions: "The masses become the audience, which in turn becomes the people." He says this in *William Shakespeare*, where he analyzes the political functions of the playwright as creator of audience, inventor of "the people," concluding that a writer's chief function is to create civilization itself by cultivating readers; hence his great injunction to authors: "*construire le peuple.*"

Whereas Hugo has often been seen as the naive "bard of progress," the celebrant of redemptive love and Dickensian sentiment, Brombert has deepened our view of Hugo by addressing the darker, visionary side. "The peculiar power of Hugo's narratives stems in large part from their ability to conceal and reveal the sense that writing itself is a tragic act," Brombert writes. Quoting again from *William Shakespeare*, a fairly neglected text, he observes that Hugo believed that a great artist like Shakespeare (and, by implication, Victor Hugo!) shudders at his own depth: "*Il a l'horreur de sa profondeur.*" His readings of *Notre-Dame de Paris* and *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, of *L'homme qui rit* and *Les Misérables* are complex and sustained examples of exactly the kind of critical writing he proposes in the preface to *The Hidden Reader*, writing that avoids "pseudoscientific arrogance and theoretical terrorism," allowing the text to assert its primary or intended meaning while transmitting, for the "hidden" reader, a metatext that comments on and, usually, undermines the primary text.

Among the most interesting essays in this new collection is "Sartre, Hugo, and Grandfather"—a wonderfully subtle study in poetic misprision. Superficially, one might expect Sartre to despise Hugo's pretensions to being the "*incontestable souverain du siècle.*" Hugo was able to proclaim France a supreme spiritual power because of its

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"literary priesthood," Brombert notes. Sartre should have been repulsed. But he was irresistibly drawn to his great forebear, partly because of Hugo's unmistakable vitality of language and visionary gleam, partly because Hugo in his distinctive way foreshadows Sartre's notion of *engagement*, of the writer's responsibilities to his or her society. But Sartre was obviously uncomfortable with his attraction to Hugo, too, and Brombert expertly teases out the nature of this discomfort: "Hugo remains an oppressive, paradigmatic, and very intimate presence" for Sartre, he suggests.

In each of the writers he discusses, Brombert is drawn to the contradictions which underlie their work—contradictions which point to their modernity, as well. Irony, as one might expect, is what unites these writers, enabling them to contain paradoxes, to use the natural combustion of opposition to empower a work of art. Balzac, for instance, was obsessed with the mundane world, revering verisimilitude and journalistic precision. He was the the faithful scribe of society, creating a human comedy with over two thousand characters in a sequence of novels as synoptic and comprehensive as the world has ever seen. Nevertheless, Balzac had yearnings for the supernatural. Reading *La Peau de chagrin* (1831), Balzac's first important success, Brombert traces the contradictory motions embodied in "a vision both realistic and supernatural."

It was a similar paradox that obsessed Flaubert, to whom Brombert devotes five essays in *The Hidden Reader*. Flaubert, he suggests, was forced to reconcile his desire to remake the language, to renew his vision through language, with the obvious fact that language is inevitably a soiled medium that resists the demands put upon it by the creative mind. Thus, Flaubert's primary mission, his *raison d'être*, was "Transmutation, recasting, transformation, metamorphosis . . ." As Flaubert himself put it: "I wish . . . to transform through Art everything I have felt." Thus, in his final essay on Flaubert, Brombert surmises that one "might justifiably claim that the profound and unifying *subject* of Flaubert is not this or that character in a given setting, but the struggle against the very conditions of existence by means of what he himself defines as the 'plastic and total recasting through Art.' "

As in the essays on Balzac, Brombert finds an ironic tension between Flaubert's attention to the particulars of this world (for him, the cult of memory was central) and the urge toward transcendence. In "Flaubert and the Articulations of Polyvalence," he offers a meticulous reading of *L'Education sentimentale* that highlights the Romantic dialectic of inner and outer worlds. The story, of course, concerns the life-apprenticeship of a young individual—the classic *Bildungsroman*. But it is also the history of a generation as well as a documentary glance at a crucial moment in French history. But what is history? Is it the events of 1848, which Flaubert observes from a distance or the private fluctuations of a human heart?

Sartre, as Brombert says, reviled Flaubert for having been a ret-

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rospective spectator of the 1848 uprising; he further criticized him for his terrified withdrawal in the face of the Commune. Flaubert lived his life, Sartre said, as though he were already posthumous: an attitude that led to a total detachment of art from life in the *l'art pour l'art* movement. Going beyond Sartre's critique, Brombert shows us a Flaubert thoroughly aware of this dialectic, of the parallel (or counterpointing) themes traced on the one hand by the street riots and on the other by the sentimental fluctuations of Frédéric and Rosanette. In other words, Flaubert's novel has folded within it its own critique.

Brombert's three essays on Baudelaire dwell on the seeming contradiction between Baudelaire's explicit rationality and his attraction to things existing beyond the boundaries of common sense—the realm of the ineffable, the transcendent. Seeking what lies beyond "normal" experience, Baudelaire was led to experimentation with drugs and sex, of course. Like most of the great Romantic writers, he felt compelled to test the boundaries of reason, to push to the extremities of life. A theory of creativity would seem to follow from this that celebrates free association, irrationality, lack of formal restraints, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling," as Wordsworth put it. But this is not so.

Readers forget that in Wordsworth's famous Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* he speaks of powerful emotion *recollected in tranquility*. Likewise, Baudelaire repeatedly stressed in his prose writings the necessity of control: "Every literary composition," he wrote, "even criticism, must be controlled with an end in mind." If anything, Baudelaire was an apostle of intentionalism. So Brombert argues, convincingly, that "a framework of explicit artistic control appears as a recurrent pattern in Baudelaire's work." Tracing this ironic pattern in "La Chevelure," for instance, he alerts us to the inadequacy of reading that poem as a straightforward paean to romantic or sensuous love; rather, he sees it as an almost ironic commentary on the intoxication of love—with all the attendant misery that slight shift of emphais implies. In a dazzling piece of close reading, Brombert shows how Baudelaire's irony cuts through this poem on every level, undermining its most literal meanings.

There are two closely linked essays on Stendhal which, similarly, point out a contradictory aspect of another great Romantic. Stendhal was another self-declared admirer of rational discourse. Indeed, his style of writing—meticulous, almost clinical at times—would seem the perfect instrument for a novelist with such predilections. Yet Stendhal, early on, confessed to "an affliction." On 30 April 1805 he wrote in his journal that he was suffering "a strange state of madness." His problem was that he found himself adoring Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the quintessential Romantic. He read Rousseau eagerly, and, as Brombert shows: "These readings had a decisive influence on Stendhal's imagination." In particular, *Le Rouge et*

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le Noir and *Vie de Henry Brulard* reveal powerful, yet hidden, affinities with Rousseau's *Confessions*—affinities that Stendhal utilized with playful irony.

The final essay in the book is a mild curiosity. "T.S. Eliot and the Romantic Heresy" attacks Eliot and the New Critics rather vehemently for their dislike and dismissal of Romanticism, for their celebration of the de-personalized artist. In most ways, Brombert's outline of this peculiar *cul de sac* of literary history is clear and accurate, but the essay ignores the more recent work of critics like Harold Bloom and George Bornstein, who have gone a long way toward clearing up the New Critical fog over this issue. There is a straight line from Milton through Blake and Rousseau through Baudelaire, Yeats and Stevens. Even Shelley has been rescued from Eliot and his circle. So Brombert's defense of the great French Romantics, at least in this final essay, seems unnecessary, however eloquent it may be.

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**Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Reading, rightly understood, is a relationship; we read, Auden said, "to break bread with the dead." "All methods of criticism and teaching are bad," wrote Northrop Frye, "if they encourage the persistent separation of student and literary work"; our job as teachers is to try our best to "weaken those tendencies within criticism which keep the literary work objective and separated from the reader." I would rather have students too naive than not naive enough. Distrusts exacts a price, as when children are taught to refuse rides from strangers. We pay it as criticism metastasizes, as we read more and more cleverly, first looking behind masks, then discerning masks where no masks are, then persuading ourselves that the eyeholes are empty.

—Clara Claiborne Park, "Talking Back to the Speaker," p. 21.

More than many contemporary writers, Mary McCarthy's personae and her writing have seemed to invite attack, for daring, irreverence, heartlessness. . . . Those exposés—*romans à clef* of the intellectual world, with keys attached—notoriously used her friends' lives for material, barely disguising the details needed for the picture. . . . Mary McCarthy did not scruple to impale her closest and oldest friends, and they have often made the most pointed attacks in reply . . .

—Sonya Rudikoff, "An American Woman of Letters," p. 45.

I do not reject "performance art" because it is visually oriented, or nonliterary, or even because it is large in scale. Theatre has many functions, is many things. There have been all sorts of theatrical ideologues who have insisted that theatre must be this, must not be that, whereas its flexibility is its greatest virtue. Nevertheless, theatre, like any other art form, exists ultimately to challenge, to provoke, to bring change. Breuer, Wilson, and their ilk, all middle-class, middle-aged impresarios of the nonprofit era, pose at being daring and advanced, while instead producing luxury goods for a carriage trade.

—Richard Hornby, "Avant-Garde Follies," p. 117.

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